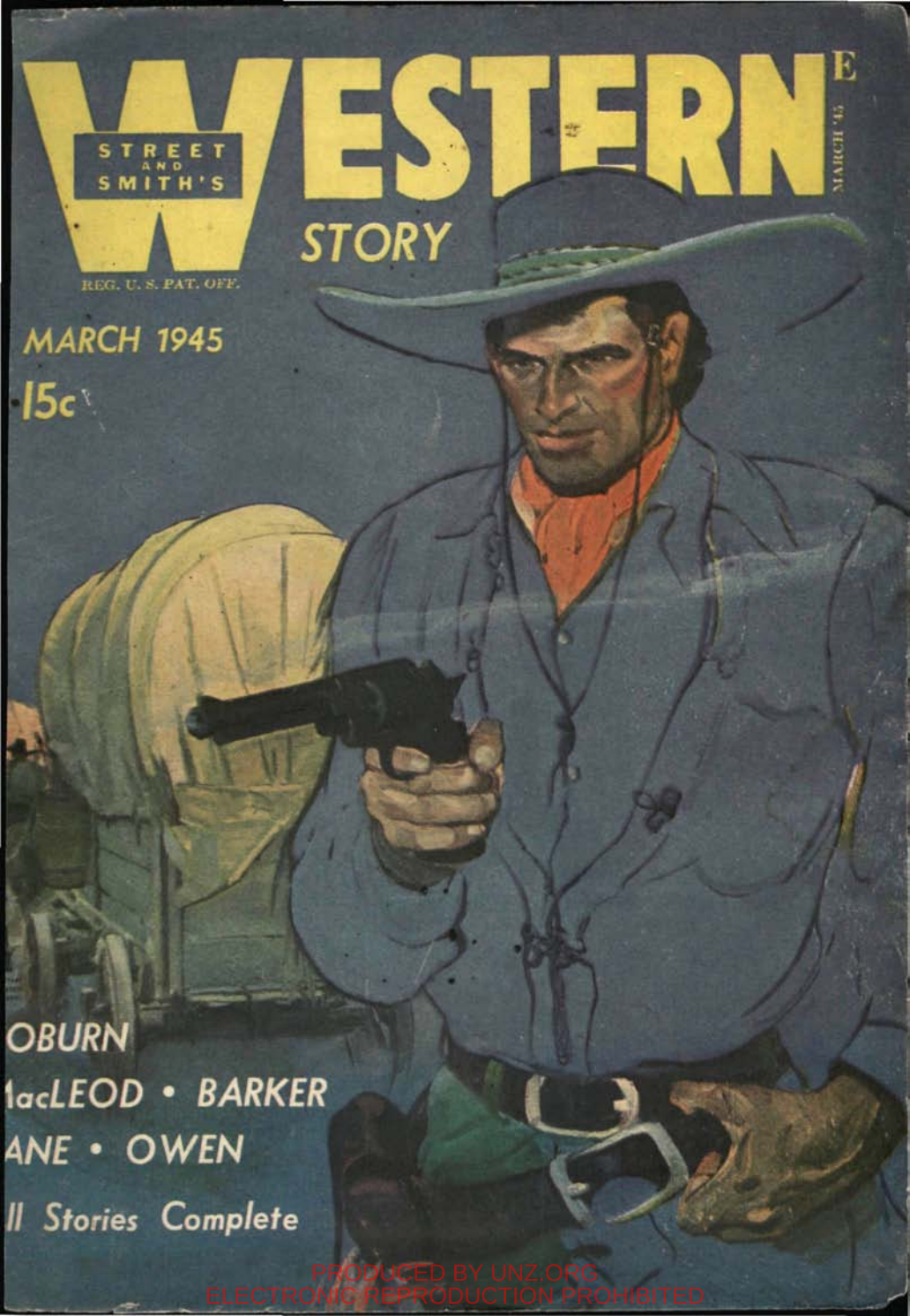

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Get after that cold in the 1st round

Gargle
LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC
Quick!

THE TIME to fight a cold is at the very start . . . before potentially troublesome germs in the throat can stage a "mass invasion" of the tissue to aggravate the infection.

In short, attack these germs before they attack you.

Fewer Colds, Tests Showed

Listerine Antiseptic, used as a gargle, reaches-way back on throat surfaces to kill millions of the "Secondary Invaders."

Medical men say that though many colds may be started by a virus, these threatening "Secondary Invaders" can make it complicated and are responsible for much of its discomfort and misery.

Prompt and frequent antiseptic action against them may help Nature nip the cold "in the bud," or reduce its severity once it has developed. That goes, too, for simple sore throat.

Tests made during twelve years of research bear this out. Here is what they showed:

That regular twice-a-day users of Listerine Antiseptic had fewer colds and sore throats, and usually had milder colds than non-Listerine Antiseptic users.

So, remember! At the first sneeze, sniffle, chill or cough, get started with Listerine Antiseptic *at once* and *use it often*. This intelligent precaution may help spare you an uncomfortable siege of illness.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

IN SERVICE MORE THAN 60 YEARS

Note How Listerine Gargle Reduced Germs!

BEFORE

AFTER

Actual tests showed reductions of bacteria on mouth and throat surfaces ranging up to 96.7% fifteen minutes after the Listerine Antiseptic gargle, and up to 80% one hour after the Listerine gargle.

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"I'LL BE SEEING YOU..."

I'LL BE SEEING YOU all the way from here to hell and gone. I'll be seeing you as the lights fade down in the ship's belly tonight and everything that is "home" blacks out and there's nothing but the cold impersonal slap of the ocean against the portholes.

And I'll be seeing you as the artillery blasts shells over our heads and the tanks shoulder past us on their way to "soften up" the enemy for our show—the doughboys' show. We're the ninth inning boys. Like my C.O. said—"You still got to crawl on your belly to get to Tokyo." We're the boys who have to get close enough to the enemy to stick a bayonet in him.

But why am I telling you all this, darling? You, my gentle little wife. Maybe it's because I'm scared—scared and lonesome *already!* I wish I could leap over there and start shooting right now, tonight. If I can only get the first shot over with in a hurry—get "baptized" quick—I'll be all right.

I'll be all right anyway. Because when my turn comes to move up to face that machine-gun chatter, I'll be seeing *you*. And when the traps and nests are all cleaned out and we've mopped up with the help of our planes, tanks and artillery—I'll be back. I've booked this ocean liner for a round trip. This is one doughboy that's coming back. I'll be seeing you . . . maybe.

Keep your eye on the Infantry... the doughboy does it!

WS—18

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STREET & SMITH'S

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JOHN BURR

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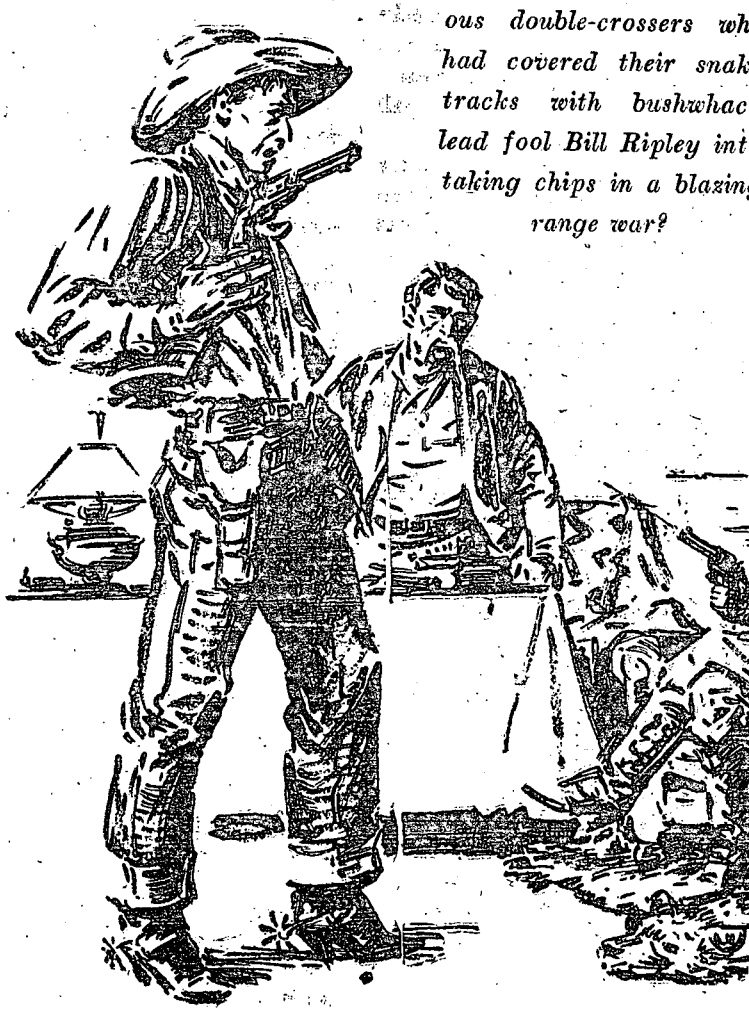
RENEGADE RAMRODS

by WALT COBURN

Would those two treacherous double-crossers who had covered their snake tracks with bushwhack lead fool Bill Ripley into taking chips in a blazing range war?



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I

FOREST FIRES had been destroying a lot of valuable timber and blackening the summer range on the Forest Reserve and ranchers had been forced to move their livestock out. Old-timers claimed it was the driest summer they'd ever seen in Montana. Prairie ranges were parched, the waterholes dried up and big creeks shrank to a trickle that crept laboriously along between boggy banks. And over it all hung the smoke pall from the forest fires.

The night was breathless and sultry and the full moon was a blood-red ball in the star-hidden sky. It was long past midnight but still an hour or two before dawn when Bill Ripley heard a hound baying. Then more hounds took up the night song and the deep baying reminded him of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and of Eliza crossing the ice with little Eva in her arms and the bloodhounds baying on her trail. The thought made him grin flatly in the darkness. Then one of the hound pack began howling and other dogs took it up and, though the night was sultry hot, Bill Ripley shivered. Because a howling dog is a sign that somebody is going to die.

He slid his saddle carbine part ways out of its scabbard, then shoved it back. But when he let his horse travel on at a running walk down the wagon trail from the wide flat bench to the ranch below, he kept his right hand near his six-shooter. Finally the log buildings and pole corrals took on black shapes in the red-tinted moonlight and he reined up in front of the big log barn with a pack of perhaps twenty big hounds surrounding him and his horse and keeping him in the saddle.

Some of the hounds were slick-haired and showed the great Dane strain. Others were shaggy, longer-headed and rangy, like Irish wolf-hounds. Two were big ourang-outang Airdale bear dogs. Most of the younger dogs were a savage mixture of all three breeds. There wasn't a wagging tail in the lot and whenever Bill Ripley moved in his saddle their big white fangs bared.

Not a light had showed at the long log bunkhouse or the small white-washed log cabin alongside it or at

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the big two-storied log house with the vine-screened porch. And nobody showed up to call off the dogs that acted as though they would tear him apart if he swung from his saddle. But Bill Ripley knew he had been sighted, that more than one pair of eyes had watched him ride down off the bench and past the corrals and scattered buildings to the big log barn. This was the Valentine ranch and a few miles back yonder, where the wagon road crossed the creek, Bill had ridden up along the sign post and the lettering, black on white, was big and bold enough to be made out even in the red moonlight. It read:

VALENTINE RANGE. KEEP OFF.
THIS MEANS YOU.

Eyes had watched him. The hound pack had warned the ranch of his coming.

Over in the big house grizzled Zed Valentine had quit snoring at the first deep-toned baying of Old Cloe, the only bloodhound on the place.

Valentine moved with a swift sureness in the darkness of his big bedroom. First he took his battered old Stetson from the bedpost and jammed it on his tousled gray head. He pulled on his pants, tucking most of the tail of his nightshirt into the waistband and hitching one gallus up over a burly shoulder. Then he took his looped cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter from the bedpost where his hat also hung, and buckled it around his wide middle and grunted as he pulled on his boots. He reached out and, without groping, found the half-empty bottle of rye on the table beside his bed and he pulled the cork and drank deeply. Then, corking the bottle, he picked up a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun on his way out into the dark hallway.

A young woman stood at the far end of the hallway, a lighted candle in her hand. She had on a crimson silk wrapper fastened around her waist by a broad black silk sash. Her blue-black hair, parted in the middle, was pulled back and plaited into a pair of heavy braids that hung below the sash. Her face was long with faint shadows under the high cheekbones, almost heavy black brows, heavily fringed eyes as green as deep lake water and a high-bridged, well-shaped nose. Marcy Valentine was strikingly beautiful, tall, slender, proud-looking. There was a silver-mounted gun in her hand, and she handled it like an expert, her long tapering fingers almost caressing the carved ivory handle. Behind her stood a coal-black great Dane with ears trimmed to a point.

"Visitors, Uncle Zed?" She had a soft, husky voice.

"Somebody don't believe in signs. Put out that damn light."

With a smile that showed her white teeth, Marcy blew out the flickering candlelight and followed him out onto the wide, vine-covered veranda.

Below the veranda gravel crunched under high-heeled boots. A man's flat-toned voice came up to them.

"Lone horsebacker, Zed."

"Damnit all, Troy!" Valentine's voice was a growl. "Sing out sooner

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after this. Wanta git that head o' yourn blowed off? Where's Richard?"

"Rick," said Troy, the Valentine ramrod, "is sleepin' off his town jag."

"Some day," growled Zed Valentine, "I'm a-goin' to double me a wet rope and whup that whelp off my range and plumb back to Texas. Drunk, shiftless. He should be ramroddin' the outfit I got to leave him and his sister when I kick the bucket. But no, by Satan! I got to hire me a damned gun-slingin' tough cowhand to ramrod this spread. . . . Well, what the devil you hangin' around here fer, Troy? Git down there to the barn and earn them fightin' wages you're a-drawin'. That's what I'm payin' you ten times your worth fer. Not to come moonin' around my niece."

Troy muttered something and stalked away. Tall, wide-shouldered, lean-flanked, he had the gait of a cowpuncher. Darkness hid the sinister glint in his pale-gray eyes, the twist of his thin-lipped mouth under its neatly trimmed black mustache. A handsome man, Troy. Black Irish or part Injun, old Zed Valentine claimed. A crackerjack cowhand anywhere you put him, Troy handled his tough cowhands with a brutal efficiency. And he was rank swift poison with a gun. He had a six-shooter in one hand now. A coiled shot-loaded blacksnake whip in the other. The whip was for the dogs. It was the only way he could handle the hound pack. Deep inside him he was afraid of the dogs which belonged to Marcy Valentine.

Marcy saw the blacksnake in Troy's hand as he walked swiftly away and was lost in the black smoky shadows of the night. Her laugh was soft, mirthless, husky. And she reached down with one hand and rubbed the stiff hackles of the Dane's neck and shoulders.

"Hate him, don't you, Satan?" she said softly.

"One of these times," growled Zed Valentine, "them blasted hounds of yourn will kill somebody. A man can't step out the door without 'em follerin' 'im."

"Because they like you, Uncle Zed. And they like Rick. Must be your whiskey odor. You growl and snarl at 'em but they wag their tails like fool pups. They don't trust Troy, though."

"Who does? Them dogs has sense. You comin'?" Valentine headed for the barn.

Bill Ripley sat his horse in the dim red moonlight, the hound pack eyeing him in white-fanged silence. Then he saw the tall man walking toward him, a six-shooter in his hand.

"Your hounds"—Bill kept his hand on his gun—"got me treed like a possum."

"Step down, stranger."

"I'll leave jobs like that to Daniel in his lions den, mister."

"Back!" Troy's voice was sharp-edged. "Back to your den!" The wide popper of the blacksnake cracked like a pistol.

The hound pack turned on the ramrod, snarling, teeth bared. The blacksnake hissed and cracked. A big wiry-haired brindle hound crouched

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as though he was going to spring at Troy.

Then Marcy Valentine's husky voice sounded. "Here, boys. Come to heel!"

The big dogs circled past Troy and his whip and surrounded the girl who came on slowly out of the night's shadows. She stood there in the silk wrapper as blood red as the moon and her husky voice was low-toned with fury.

"Throw away that whip, Troy. If ever you hit one of my dogs, I'll let 'em at you."

"If ever they tackle me, lady, they'll be the deadest pack of mongrels you ever seen when I'm done shootin'." Troy kept his blacksnake.

Bill Ripley was staring at the girl, inarticulate, slack-jawed, awed by the sight of her exotic beauty. You might expect to see such a woman on the stage. But not on a Montana cattle ranch. He pulled off his hat, suddenly aware of the fact that he hadn't shaved for a week and that his hair was sweat-matted and needed cutting. He felt awkward and clumsy and tongue-tied.

"Who in blazes are you, stranger?" Big Zed Valentine stalked past the girl and her hound pack, the sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm and his eyes slits of steel under ragged brows. "Where's the rest of your night-ridin' outfit?"

"I'm alone. Headed for a town called Prairie. Took the wrong fork in the wagon trail."

"What fetches you here?" growled Valentine.

"A played-out leg-weary geldin'. If you'll stake me to a fresh horse I'll travel along."

"You read the sign at the roundup crossin' on Valentine Crick," growled the big grizzled cowman.

"It was dark, mister."

Bill Ripley saw them eyeing him as he sat his horse. The big cowman. The six-foot Troy. The red-gowned girl with the dogs. Sweat bathed him and there was a cold feeling in the pit of his empty stomach. He hadn't eaten since yesterday. Hadn't slept for two nights. Pain from his freshly healed bullet wounds clawed at his back and thighs. Above the stubble of dusty and sweat-grimed dirty yellow whiskers his skin was a sweat-beaded gray color and his bloodshot blue-gray eyes were deep sunken in dark sockets. He was near the point of exhaustion. He should have taken the advice of those Wyoming doctors and stayed another two weeks or a month even, in the Wind River hospital. He'd traveled the last hundred miles on his nerve. It was catching up with him now. Right now when he needed all his strength and wits. He was hanging onto the saddlehorn, swaying a little, fighting off the black waves of dizziness.

"Drunk." Old Zed Valentine's growl sounded dimly in Bill's ears.

"He's not drunk, Uncle Zed. Sick. Hurt. . . . There he goes. Grab 'im before he hits the ground, Troy!"

Bill Ripley slid his feet from the stirrups and hung onto the saddlehorn, keeping his hold on it as his right leg swung across the saddle cantle. He was standing on both feet, still hanging to the saddlehorn when

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he passed out, an apologetic grin on his wide, tight-lipped mouth.

II

He came alive with the burning taste of raw whiskey in his throat. The biggest, blackest, most vicious-looking dog he had ever seen in his life was standing over him. The dog licked his whiskered blunt jaw and Bill heard a girl's soft, husky laugh.

"You big softy . . . sissy—"

Bill Ripley grinned shamedly and tried to sit up. He was lying on a big wide couch covered with a Navajo blanket. In a huge room with varnished log walls and polished hardwood floor. A big lamp burned on a huge table that was littered with books.

"Not you," said the girl. "Satan. First time he ever made up like that to anybody. That's a welcome, stranger. And the best recommendation you could get around these parts, so far as I'm concerned. I'm Marcy Valentine. Who are you?"

"Bill Ripley. Called Rip, mostly."

She poured him a stiff drink. He was rubbing the Dane's head behind the pointed ears. The dog's yellow eyes stared at him. The tail did not wag. But the cold wet muzzle shoved into the sweaty dusty bristle of his whiskers.

Bill took the filled glass from the girl and he had to hold it in both hands. The whiskey went down like liquid fire. And when it melted the cold lump inside his belly and fired the blood in his veins he sat up.

Marcy Valentine had changed into a soft gray dress and coiled the two braids like a crown on her head. She smiled faintly, her green eyes watching him with faint amusement.

"Just a stranger in a strange land," she said in her husky voice. "Just drifting through, Rip?"

"Sort o'." Pain shot through his back and down into his thighs like a knife stab in the back. He winced a little.

"Hurt?" Marcy asked softly. And poured whiskey from a cut glass decanter into the glass he still held.

"Kind o' lame." He gulped down the drink and shook his head and handed her the empty glass.

"That's all I kin take on an empty stomach."

"When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday about daybreak."

She nodded and crossed over to the table and lifted a big white cloth from hot food.

"There's water and soap and a clean towel in the washroom yonder." She pointed to a door in the corner of the big room. "Can you make it?"

Rip said he reckoned he could. The big black Dane followed him across the room. There was a big pitcher of hot water. Another pitcher of cold water. He spent about five minutes washing up, grinning at his reflection in the shaving mirror. There was a shaving outfit there and he stropped the razor and lathered his face and shaved quickly, nicking himself in two or three places. But he was clean-shaved and not quite so tough-looking when he walked out of the washroom. He was half tipsy and felt good for the first time in days.

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Marcy Valentine filled two cups with strong black coffee and motioned with the coffeepot for him to sit down. Half a dozen fried eggs, fried potatoes and bacon were heaped on a plate and there were hot biscuits with chokecherry jam on the table that was set with a red-and-white-checkered cloth and solid silver. Bill tried not to wolf his grub.

Marcy Valentine sat across from him sipping black coffee and looking too beautiful to be real. On the table beyond Rip's reach was his cartridge belt and holstered gun.

"Uncle Zed and Troy are eating breakfast with the men," Marcy said. "They'll be here soon. So get your story straight."

"What story?" he countered.

The girl's green eyes were watching him narrowly. Her red mouth smiled at him. There was mockery in her smile.

"Whatever your story is."

She reached into a pocket of the gray dress and took out a law badge. "United States Deputy Marshal" was engraved on the metal. She tossed it across the table to him.

"I found it in your pocket—before Troy frisked you. Lucky. Troy doesn't like law officers. Nor does Zed Valentine. So don't pin that badge on your shirt. And if you want it this way, I'll keep my mouth shut."

Rip's face flushed redly. "Gosh . . . That's mighty white of you, maam. But I'm not—"

"Marcy is my name, Rip—when they're not around. And don't thank me. There's a motive behind my secrecy. I might need you. You and your law. Is it a deal?"

Bill Ripley looked straight into the girl's green eyes. He read something like terror there. But only for the briefest fraction of a moment.

"It's a deal," he heard himself telling Marcy Valentine.

"I knew you couldn't fool Satan. Look at him. The big clown."

The big black Dane shoved his massive head in Rip's lap. Rip scratched the dog's neck. Then the dog walked around to where Marcy sat in a huge leather chair and shoved his head in her lap.

"If ever Troy tried to lay a hand on him," said Marcy quietly, "Satan would tear his throat out. Or if ever Troy forgot himself and touched me, the pack would tear him apart. Dogs are like that; you can't buy their loyalty or friendship. And it takes more than a blacksnake or gun to stop that pack. Later on, I'll make you acquainted with 'em all. If Brin takes you on as a friend, the rest of the pack will let you alone or he'll shake their hides off. . . . Had enough to eat, Rip?"

"That's the best bait of grub I ever tackled." Bill Ripley grinned and reached for tobacco and papers.

He was tongue-tied again when he tried to thank her. And before he could get his tongue untied the front door opened, and a tall, lean, handsome-looking young cowpuncher in his early twenties lurched into the room, shut the door behind him and leaned against it. His curly dark chestnut hair was rumpled, sweat-damp, his bloodshot green-gray eyes a little glazed. His tailored gray

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flannel shirt and whipcord pants were rumpled and spotted with spilled liquor. A stubble of reddish whiskers marred the clean line of his jaw.

"Listen, sis, I got to have five thousand bucks. The tinhorns took me—"

Then he saw Bill Ripley and he stiffened, staring suspiciously.

"Who's he, Marcy?" His voice was suddenly harsh.

"A stranger, Rick. He got lost on his way to town. Take your hand off your gun. You look silly. Better wash up."

"I've got to see you alone." His voice was sullen.

"To the tune of five thousand dollars." She turned to Bill Ripley.

"My brother, Richard Valentine. Rick, for short. Sober, he's a good kid. Drunk, he's a mess. He's got a hangover now that's a prize winner. . . . Rick, this is Bill Ripley. Uncle Zed and Troy are going to put him through the mill directly. Wash the cobwebs away and sit in on the session. But keep your ante out of it."

Rick Valentine headed for the decanter. He poured himself two big drinks and downed them fast. The glazed look went out of his eyes and he grinned. It was a boyish kind of grin but weak.

"You won't let me down, sis?"

"Not if you'll sober up and quit gambling. Pull yourself up by the old boot straps, bub. Or you'll be going down the road talking to yourself. Unless you like staying on here as a forty-a-month cowhand and calling Troy 'Mister.' Troy has that batch of I.O.U.'s you wrote out for the tinhorn gamblers at Prairie."

"Where'd he—who—"

"Troy? Don't ask me how he got hold of 'em. He offered them to me for a price. Now go clean up."

But Rick Valentine did not go. He stood there, long legs spread, his brows pulled into a twisted scowl, blinking the glazed film from his eyes, fighting to sober up.

"What kind of a price did that damned Troy hang on my lousy gamblin' paper, sis?"

Rick Valentine forgot his tough swagger. The sulky, sullen tone was gone from his voice. He spoke quietly and his gray green eyes were clearing and he looked as though he could be dangerous.

Marcy smiled faintly. "Troy must have seen the road-show troupers play 'The Drunkard.' He's playing the heavy villain. He demands the gal's hand in marriage—with the Valentine outfit thrown in for boot."

"And if you don't see eye to eye with him, he'll take my gamblin' debts to Uncle Zed?"

"You're catchin on, bub."

"Tell Troy," said Rick Valentine, "to go to hell. If he gets bothersome, sic your dogs on the big gun-slinger. Let him hand those tinhorn I.O.U.'s over to Uncle Zed. I'll take my medicine. And I'll pay off Troy with his own kind of coin." He slapped his gun butt.

Marcy shook her head. "Maybe that's just the kind of a play Troy wants you to make. Gunfighting is his trade. You wouldn't have a sheepherder's chance." She turned to Bill Ripley.

"Am I right?"

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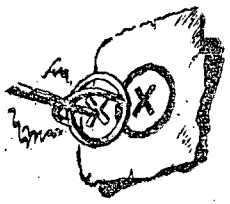
"Sounds like this Troy gent is playin' for high stakes. No holts barred."

"Who sold this stranger chips in the game, Marcy?" Rick scowled.

"I did." Marcy lowered her voice. "But Troy's dealin' from a cold deck. Swap guns with Rip. Troy salted the cartridges in his. Quick. And reload Rip's gun if you aim to use it."

Rick Valentine stared hard at Bill Ripley. Then at his sister. Sliding his six-shooter from its holster, he swapped it for the gun on the table. He shoved Bill Ripley's gun into his holster, leaving his six-shooter in Rip's holster with its filled cartridge



belt on the big table. The guns were alike, black-handled Colt .45's.

"Troy doesn't know I watched him substitute doctored cartridges in your gun," Marcy told Bill Ripley. "He'll try to crowd you into making a gun play, so don't let him pull you into the trap. But if you have no other choice, draw first and shoot to kill. At least you'll have a loaded gun in your hand. And Troy will figure it's harmless as a shootin' iron."

"Who is this gent?" repeated Rick Valentine.

"I don't know," Marcy said. "But he's on my side. Now clean up."

Rick reached for the whiskey, then changed his mind with a grimace. His tough swagger was gone when he walked away. But it seemed to Bill Ripley that young Rick Valentine was more of a man when he left the room than he'd been when he made his tipsy entrance.

"Rick's a spoiled brat," said Marcy when her brother had gone. "Wild. Wants to be tough but hasn't what it takes to back the play. And Troy prods him on. Troy would like to see Rick Valentine get killed in a saloon brawl. Just as he'd like to see a gun fight between Uncle Zed and old Whit Dixon, with Zed Valentine on the losing end. Then Troy would marry Marcy Valentine and the Valentine outfit. His tough cowhands would wipe out the Dixons. Old Whit and Whit's son Jimmy. Troy has his eye on the Dixon Quarter Circle D outfit. . . . Troy's ambitious, no?"

"Just a country boy tryin' to git along in the world."

Troy stood in the doorway, a flat-lipped grin on his face, his hand on his gun. Marcy whirled around. Bill Ripley turned his head and he wondered how long the Valentine ramrod had been standing there.

III

Boot heels clumped and big grizzled Zed Valentine followed Troy into the room. The cowman's steel-gray eyes narrowed under his ragged gray brows. Old Zeb was a huge man, big as a silvertip grizzly, and he moved with a grizzly's heavy speed. Powerful, ruthless, domineering, his

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voice a barrel-chested growl.

"Have ary trouble with the feller, Marcy?"

"No trouble at all, Uncle Zed. I gave him a drink of your likker and fed 'im. Like fattening something for the slaughterer." Her green eyes looked past Zed Valentine to Troy.

The big hawk-beaked ramrod grinned faintly. Old Zed growled into his ragged gray mustache and poured himself a drink and gulped it down.

"Better you went outside a while, Marcy," he said. "Me'n Troy want a talk with this feller."

"I don't mind your cussing, Uncle Zed. I'll sit in the corner."

"You'll git out. And take your blasted dog along."

Marcy shrugged her shoulders. The Dane followed her out of the room and the door closed behind her and the big dog.

"Buckle on your gun, mister," said Troy flatly.

It was daylight outside now and Zed Valentine pulled aside the heavy curtains to let the light into the room. Then he blew out the lamp. The early morning light filtered in, gray and smoke-laden from the distant forest fire. And the sun rose like a blood-red fire ball in the smoke-shrouded sky.

Then the big grizzled cowman stood on widespread legs, thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt, his sweat-marked hat pulled at a slant on his grizzled head. His eyes slits of glittering steel, he growled out his questions.

"You ain't deef, dumb ner blind, stranger. You read that warnin' sign last night. You know there's a cattle war goin' on between my outfit and Whit Dixon's layout. Montana's got too cramped to hold me'n that damned land-grabbin', water-stealin' cattle thief. I had to hire Troy and his tough outfit to buck range agin' the gun-packin' cowhands that damn ol' scoundrel Whit Dixon imported from Wyoming, Rafe Millsap and his renegades—as mangy a pack of coyote things as ever roamed the earth unhung. Them night-ridin' renegades has us suspicious of strangers. This is your first and last chance to spread your cards face up. I'll read 'em. Commence talkin'."

Bill Ripley stared into the cowman's eyes without flinching. Stared until old Zed Valentine was the first to look away. Then Troy broke the heavy uneasy silence.

Troy stood a few feet away, his hand on his gun, and in a flat-toned voice he began cursing. His pale gray eyes narrowed. Thin-lipped mouth twisting, he called Bill Ripley every foul fighting name he could think of. And old Zed Valentine stood back a ways watching.

Bill Ripley sat in his big leather chair. Rolling a cigarette, he lit it and let the smoke drift from his nostrils. It was as if he were listening to something that was no concern of his. And it was Troy, not Bill Ripley, who weakened first.

Sweat beaded Troy's lean dark face and trickled down from under his tilted hat. His voice got dry and rasping. A heavy rush of blood colored his almost swarthy skin and

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his pale eyes congested. Bloodshot, they mirrored the pent-up fury that lifted his voice from its toneless pitch to a loud rasping shout.

"You gutless coward! You pack a gun! Fill your hand!"

But Bill Ripley made no gun move. Just sat back in his chair, his both hands resting on the big leather arms. Tobacco smoke drifting lazily from his nostrils. Relaxed, indifferent, until Troy pulled his six-shooter.

Then Bill Ripley's gun hand moved—so fast that neither Troy nor Zed Valentine realized he was going into action. Because Bill Ripley's right arm and hand moved and the rest of his body remained relaxed and stretched out in the big chair. And then his six-shooter was gripped in his hand and it never lifted more than to tilt its blued steel barrel. Then it spat flame. Its heavy .45 slug hit the cylinder of Troy's gun and tore it from the big ramrod's hand with an explosion that sent the gun spinning through the air to land in a far corner.

Troy's gun hand, torn, bleeding, flipped crazily in the air. Shock, pain, bewilderment and sudden fear drained the color from his dark sweaty face and his pale eyes widened. He grabbed his injured hand and held it and backed towards the door. The crashing gun echoes died in the room and there was the pungent odor of burnt gunpowder. Bill Ripley was on his feet now and his gun pointed at old Zed Valentine's big belly.

"Take it easy, big mister," Bill Ripley told the cowman. "I don't like this kind o' ruckus. Better tell your tough ramrod to slow up. Looks to me like he's backin' the seat of his britches into that black hound dog's face."

The door had opened and Marcy stood there in the hallway. The big Dane blocked the doorway, teeth bared, growling softly, yellow eyes watching Troy.

Troy turned his head. When he saw the dog he froze in his tracks. Marcy Valentine's face looked pale but she was smiling now and the color came back into her cheeks.

"Shooting always excites him." Her hand was on the Dane's massive head.

Troy glared at her. He cut a swift look at the gun in Bill Ripley's hand, then back at the girl. He opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind and clamped his jaws shut.

Rick Valentine came down the hallway. He had washed up and put on clean overalls and a clean shirt and he looked cold sober when he pushed past his sister, rubbed the dog's hackles and walked into the big room. He grinned at Troy's injured hand. A taunting kind of grin. Then his gray-green eyes hardened.

"My sister says you've been bothering her, Troy. Some kind of slimy blackmail. You've got about five thousand dollars' worth of my tinhorn gambling paper. Did you buy up my I.O.U.'s from your tinhorn friends? Or are you actin' as their agent to collect what I lost to 'em?"

"They was fixin' to take it up," said Troy, "with Zed. I heard your

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Uncle Zed tell you he was done payin' your booze and poker bills. So I bought up your gamblin' paper. Tryin' to do you a favor."

"You lie, Troy," said Rick Valentine. "You tried to blackmail my sister into marryin' you. What you need is a horsewhippin'. I'll give you one." He walked over to the table where Troy had left his blacksnake. Then Rick pulled a roll of money from his pocket, tossed it on the table and picked up the loaded blacksnake.

"Lay my gamblin' paper there on the table, Troy. And pick up the money."

Troy hesitated, murder glinting in his pale eyes. The blacksnake whip hissed as Rick Valentine flipped it back. Then the heavy whip lashed out and before Troy could lift his arms to ward it off, it cut him across the face and slashed back and struck again, leaving a welt and a trickle of blood across Troy's face. And Marcy had to hold onto the big black Dane or the dog would have torn Troy's throat out. The dog was growling and whimpering, fangs bared, trembling in its savage eagerness to kill the man he hated.

Rick Valentine coiled the blacksnake whip and grinned mirthlessly.

"That's just a small sample, Troy. Now lay my gamblin' notes on the table and take your money. And if ever you speak to my sister again, I'll kill you."

Troy's face was bone-white and the whip welts ridged his skin. He turned and glared at Zed Valentine.

"It's your deal." Troy's voice was rasping, thick. "Take over."

Bill Ripley had been watching the big grizzled cowman from the corner of his eye. Zed Valentine had stood there in his big tracks, motionless, his puckered steel-gray eyes glinting and a faint grin twitching the corners of his mouth under the drooping gray mustache.

"When a man like you, Troy, a big tough ramrod that travels on his hard rep, takes a whuppin' of ary kind, he's through. He's wore out his usefulness. You lost your gun, Troy. Better saddle your private and hit the trail."

Troy looked like a man who had just been kicked hard in the belly. Letting go his injured hand, he reached into his pocket and took out some soiled-looking folded papers and tossed them on the table. He picked up the money without bothering to count it and shoved it into his pocket. His pale eyes, bloodshot, slitted, cut a brief contemptuous look at young Rick Valentine and it was like the flick of a whip. Then he looked at Marcy and there was a cold, vicious threat in the long look he gave her.

Bill Ripley felt the hard impact of Troy's stare and grinned crookedly at the big ramrod.

"Loaded, wasn't it, Troy?" Bill said softly.

Troy forced a thin-lipped grin. "Keep it loaded. I'll make you use it again."

Then Troy turned on Zed Valentine and he voiced his threat flattoned.

"This is goin' to cost you your Valentine outfit, Zed."

Turning, Troy walked across the

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room and let himself out the front door. They heard him call out to his men.

"Saddle your private horses, boys. We're headed for town and hirin' out to Whit Dixon."

Big grizzled Zed Valentine poured himself a stiff drink and downed it. Then he glared at Bill Ripley.

"You shore played hell, young feller. Throwin' me short-handed thataway. Troy was a valuable man. You'll have to be almighty good to fill his boots." There was a twinkling glint in his steely eyes.

"Meanin' just what, sir?"

"You're ramroddin' this outfit. What's your name?"

"Bill Ripley, sir. They call me Rip."

"Ever run a cow outfit, Rip?"

"Yes, sir."

"Troy fired what cowhands I had workin' fer me. They wasn't tough enough, he claimed, to git the job done. I kind o' pensioned 'em off—without Troy knowin'. Rick kin locate 'em and fetch 'em back. They ain't what you'd call fightin' men. But I reckon in a tight they kin dig into their bedrolls and warsacks and haul out a gun apiece. You won't have to git 'em drunk to make 'em tackle Troy and them tough hands he fetched along to take their places when he fired them old rannyhans. The damn ol' sons is camped down on the river, catfishin', an' roundsidin'. Some of Whit Dixon's old hands throwed in with 'em. They was let out when Whit Dixon hired Rafe Millsap fer a ramrod. Millsap claimed he couldn't use them old mossyhorns. Rick kin hire 'em back."

"Offer 'em fightin' wages, Rick," said Rip. "And tell 'em I still got the seat left in my britches."

Rip grinned at Zed Valentine, then at Marcy. "I stayed all night at their camp. They told me the dogs would bite."

Zed Valentine gave him a hard look, then told Marcy she'd better call her hounds before Troy and his outfit commenced killin' the dogs they all hated.

Marcy whistled and the hall filled with hounds. They came piling into the big room.

"I had them in my room," she said, "just in case." Then she tossed six cartridges on the table and told Zed and Rip to pry the lead bullets out.

Rip opened them with his jackknife blade. None of the cartridges had any powder in the brass shells. Marcy told her uncle she'd seen Troy put the cartridges in Rip's six-shooter. Rick had given her the cartridges from Bill Ripley's gun after swapping the six-shooter.

"Troy aimed to murder Rip," Marcy said quietly.

"Right here in my ranchhouse!"

"Why?" Rick put the question bluntly.

"Troy," said Bill Ripley, "don't like strangers. Let it go at that."

Rick Valentine had been edging towards the big table and Bill Ripley thought it was the whiskey he was after. Then he saw Rick reach out with a furtive show of careless-

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ness and pick up the folded I. O. U.'s Troy had laid there.

But before Rick could destroy the papers his sister said something in a low tone to the Dane. Without a sound or show of ferocity the big dog grabbed Rick's wrist and held it and it was only when the young cowman tried to yank free that the big Dane's fangs clamped tighter, but still not deep enough to tear the skin. Rick Valentine's face whitened. Marcy smiled faintly and walked over unhurriedly and took the several folded papers from her brother's hand.

"Don't be a sneaking cheat, bub." Her voice was quiet-toned. She nodded to the Dane and he let go. "They're mine. My money bought 'em."

Marcy put the folded papers in her pocket without looking at them. Rick's face was livid and he rubbed his wrist where the big dog's teeth had clamped.

Zed Valentine had gone out onto the porch and saw nothing of the strange little byplay inside the room.

"It ain't any of my business," said Bill Ripley, "but if it was me, I'd check them I. O. U.'s against the money I paid for 'em."

Marcy's smile chilled. But she took the folded papers out of her pocket and glanced at them quickly.

"Five notes. Each for a thousand dollars. Right, bub?"

"And each of 'em"—there was a nasty tone to Rick Valentine's voice —"made out to Jim Dixon. Right, sis." His eyes held hers.

Marcy's face reddened and her head tilted high. Bill Ripley turned and walked out onto the big veranda to join old Zeb Valentine.

"Yonder," growled Zed Valentine, "go Troy and his outfit. It's all yourn now, Rip."

IV

There was something almighty wrong there at the Valentine ranch. Something dark and ugly and sinister. Brief glimpses of it came to light, then were hidden again before Bill Ripley got a good look at what he'd seen. Rick's drinking; his gambling debts; the look in his eyes when he said those I.O.U. notes were made out to Jim Dixon. And the flush that had colored Marcy's face, the hard bright-green glint in her eyes as though she wanted to slap her brother's mouth shut.

Getting rid of Troy was only the beginning. Bill Ripley had smoked Troy and his renegades out into the open. But from now on he'd have to watch his step. Get a line on things. Trust nobody. Trust Marcy Valentine least of all because she was as dangerous as she was beautiful. Marcy and her big black Dane Satan. Her hound pack.

Marcy had seen that law badge and had drawn her own conclusions. Let it ride like that. She'd said she needed Rip's help. But getting rid of Troy might have been what she meant. Bill Ripley had a notion that somehow Marcy Valentine had double-crossed the ramrod; that Troy had let her watch him doctor Bill Ripley's six-shooter, then left her to ride close-herd on the stranger. And Marcy had played both ends

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against the middle, gambling that Bill Ripley would kill Troy with Rick's gun. Bill had watched her narrowly when she opened the door and stood with the big black Dane. She'd showed her disappointment at seeing Troy alive after that shot. Marcy Valentine had a cold-blooded streak in her beautiful make-up. Even as her brother Rick was weak. In her own clever way she had pitted Bill Ripley against Troy because she wanted to get rid of Troy. The big handsome ramrod was getting the upper hand here at the ranch, getting too tight a tail holt on the outfit and perhaps jockeying Marcy into a pocket. Marcy couldn't, wouldn't stand for Troy or anyone to get the upper hand. She wanted to hold the whip. Bill Ripley warned himself that he'd have to watch his step or he'd fall in love with Marcy Valentine.

Bill Ripley bedded down and slept until supper time. Rick had pulled out, gone to fetch the old crew of cowhands Troy had fired. Marcy had saddled her horse and ridden away with her pack of hounds. And when Bill Ripley, shaved, scrubbed with hot water and soap, his wiry black hair trimmed by the Chinaman cook, had put on the clean clothes Rick had given him from an ample wardrobe, he went to the house to have a medicine talk with Zed Valentine.

The big cowman motioned him towards the whiskey and a big leather chair. Then he fired what he figured was a verbal gunshot.

"Got a law badge in your pocket, ain't yuh, Rip?"

Bill Ripley poured himself a drink and grinned. "My dad's law badge. I'm packin' it for luck. They murdered him when he cut the sign of some cattle rustlers that was trailin' a big drive of stolen cattle out o' Wyoming into Montana. And they shot me up some. You got some of them stolen cattle now in your Heart iron, Zed. Whit Dixon put the rest of 'em in his Quarter Circle D brand. Troy and Rafe Millsap made the dicker for Zed Valentine and Whit Dixon. Stop me when I git on the wrong trail."

"Go right on talkin', young feller."

"This range war between Zed Valentine and Whit Dixon," Bill Ripley held his drink in his hand, "it shore fools the natives, don't it, Zed?"

The remark caught the big grizzled cowman swallowing a big shot of raw whiskey. He choked and sputtered and coughed. Then, when he was through coughing, he leaned forward in his heavy leather chair, his slitted steely eyes peering through bushy brows.

"Right now, by Jehoshaphat," he growled, "it's foolin' me and Whit Dixon!" His big fist slammed down on the arm of his leather chair.

"How long has it bin, Zed, since you rode away from your home ranch alone?"

"Too long. If I ride out alone, day or night, I git shot at and hardly missed. I don't know what in thunder goes on out on my own range. I got a weak-spined, gutless nephew. I got a niece that keeps a pack of dogs that'll drag a man off his horse and chaw his throat out if she gives

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'em such orders. That damned Troy and his tough hands bin runnin' my outfit fer me. Till you showed up. You got shut of Troy. What's your next move, young feller?"

"I'm ridin' over to the Quarter Circle D home ranch," said Bill Ripley. "If my luck holds, I aim to smoke out Rafe Millsap like I crowded Troy into the open."

"Lone-handed?"

"Lone-handed." Bill nodded. "That's the only way I kin git the job done."

"Meanin', Rip, you can't trust nobody but yourself?"

Bill Ripley nodded. "And trustin' myself ain't pickin's."

"Meanin' Marcy?" chuckled Zed Valentine.

Bill Ripley's tanned face colored darkly. His grin was lopsided. "Meanin' Marcy."

"You cold-trailed them stolen cattle here, Rip. Could be you might send me'n Whit Dixon to the pen fer takin' delivery on them cattle that's now wearin' my Heart and Whit Dixon's Quarter Circle D and the brands hardly haired-over. The Deer Lodge pen wouldn't be much worse than bein' held pris'ner on my own home ranch. But I got a notion that ain't your game, son."

"No, sir. I'd trust you and Whit Dixon all the way down the line. You're both old-timers. Cowmen. No better, no worse than other big cattle outfits. It don't matter right now how you and Whit Dixon got messed up in the cattle rustlin'. It's Troy and Rafe Millsap I'm after."

"Why the devil didn't you kill Troy when you had your chance, son?"

"I don't know," admitted Rip. "Except that I knew that Marcy Valentine expected me to kill Troy. So instead I just pulled his fangs and watched the results."

"Satisfied with them results, Rip?"

"Not plumb satisfied. Puzzled. I got to fit the chunks of that puzzle together. I might be givin' Troy and Rafe Millsap enough rope to hang theirselves."

"Providin' they don't lynch you with that rope."

"Yes, sir. . . . It was Marcy told you I had a law badge, Zed?"

"Yep. She warned me. Then taken her damn hounds and rode off."

"Rode off," said Bill Ripley, his voice hard, tainted with bitterness, "to warn Jim Dixon."

"Mebby. Or mebbyso just to warn Whit Dixon. Hard to figger what Marcy will do."

"It was Jim Dixon," said Bill Ripley slowly, "who took delivery on the stolen cattle. Paid Troy and Rafe Millsap. Cash on the barrel head. Rick was reppin' for the Valentine Heart iron when the cattle were branded at the camp on the Missouri River where Rick's gone to gather your old crew of cowhands. Where was Marcy?"

"Here. Right here at the home ranch. With her dogs. Ridin' close herd on me'n Whit Dixon. The three of us playin' poker. Marcy rakin' in the big jackpots. And every time me or Whit started out a door, there'd be one of them damned hounds barrin' the way."

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Zed Valentine cussed into his ragged gray mustache, poured himself another drink and downed it. Bill Ripley grinned flatly.

"That's all I want to know, Zed." Bill downed his drink and got to his feet, hitching up his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. He was packing his own gun again.

"I'm pullin' out now for the Quarter Circle D home ranch, Zed. I just saw Marcy ride up to the barn with her hound pack. So she'll be here to ride herd on you. And your job will be to keep her from trailin' me when I pull out."

Zed Valentine nodded. "You got guts, Rip. And I hope you got the horse sense to go with them guts. Come a tight, you kin bank on me. Tell Whit Dixon what me'n you bin talkin' over and ol' Whit will back ary play you make. I'll shake on it."

They gripped hands and Bill Ripley left the big grizzled cowman standing there with a fresh drink in his hand.

V

Marcy met Bill at the barn. The Dane shoved his massive head into Rip's hand. The big brindle pack leader circled him warily, then sniffed his hand and let Rip scratch his scarred head and ragged ears. Then the other hounds made their friendly overtures. While Marcy, dressed in shabby riding clothes looked on smiling, the hardness gone from her black-fringed deep-green eyes.

"You're the only man they ever picked out for me, Rip. Reckon there's something prophetic in it?"

Bill Ripley felt his face and ears redden hotly. "Not," he said boldly, watching her eyes, "while I got tough competition like Jim Dixon."

Marcy still smiled. But the soft gay sparkle died in her eyes and left them as cold as deep winter ice.

"You and Uncle Zed must have had quite a medicine talk." Her husky voice was quiet. "I told him about your law badge."

"Yeah. I know. Thoughtful of yuh."

Marcy pulled off her buckskin gauntlet gloves. She slapped the leg of her shabby leather divided skirt. Her almost heavy black brows knit into a level line.

"Where were you thinking of going?" she asked coldly.

"Ridin'. Horseback ridin'. I need the exercise."

"Before supper?"

"I ate a lone supper."

"If I told the dogs to keep you out of the barn—"

"I'd hate to shoot that big black Dane. I like dogs. They like me. The black 'un is the only one you could make charge me. Zed Valentine hired me to ramrod his outfit. I'm givin' the orders here now. Not takin' 'em. Let's try to git along thataway." Bill Ripley grinned faintly, his eyes watching hers.

And he saw the hard glitter melt in the girl's green eyes. Watched them darken with something like fear. Then she reached out and took his hand.

"You give the orders, Rip. I'll have to put it another way. I'm

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afraid. Afraid they'll kill you if you ride away from here alone. Like they've threatened to kill Uncle Zed. He's told you, perhaps, that he's a prisoner here on his own home ranch. I've had to keep him here. For his own protection. Those men are playing for keeps. Don't ride away from here alone, Rip. They'll murder you!"

"Then it's all in a day's work, Marcy. You ride herd on Zed. I'm takin' a little pasear. I'm goin' to make war medicine with an old-time cattleman named Whit Dixon."

Marcy Valentine clung tightly to his hand. Hers was cold. And there was no doubting the fear in her eyes.

"No. No, Rip. Not alone. They'll bushwhack you. Troy and his renegades. Or if you get past them you'll be stopped at the Dixon drift fence. The gates along that fence are padlocked. Rafe Millsap's tough cowhands are riding fence there. They'll shoot you out of your saddle."

"I've dodged gun traps before now. It'll be dark. That red moon don't shed much light. I know what I'm ridin' into. I aim to shoot first if I'm stopped. It's all in the game, lady."

"What *is* your game?"

"Killin' off men that have needed killin' for a long time. Men like Troy. And Rafe Millsap. Mebbyso like Jim Dixon."

"No. You're wrong about Jim Dixon. . . . I rode there today. I went there to see Jim Dixon. About Rick's gambling debts. To find out why those I.O.U. notes were made out to Jim. Because Jim Dixon is no tinhorn gambler. Penny ante is Jim's speed. He's no fast gun fighter, either. Give Jim Dixon a fair chance, Rip. He never hurt you. You can't hold a grudge against a man you don't even know. You're a law officer. Killing men is part of your trade. But if you kill Jim Dixon, then you're hiding behind a law badge to do plain murder. . . . Why didn't you kill Troy?"

"That's what Zed Valentine asked me. He'll tell you my answer to that 'un. . . . Jim Dixon will git his fair chance to clear himself. I don't particularly enjoy shootin' a man. Where'll I find him?"

"I . . . I don't know. Rafe Millsap stopped me at the big gate. Troy had been to see Millsap. He turned me back. He said Jim Dixon was in town on a drunk. He lied. Jim doesn't drink. Not that much. There's trouble coming. Why didn't you kill Troy when I gave you the chance?"

"Ask your Uncle Zed. So long, Marcy. See you when I git back."

The red moon was almost hidden tonight in the smoke-filled sky. Bill Ripley rode with his hand near his gun. Several times he rode out and around places where bushwhackers

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might be waiting. Two or three times he heard little groups of night-riding men before they heard or sighted him. That was the advantage of playing it lone-handed. One lone rider can dodge and twist and get through where even two men might be discovered. Rip's only disadvantage was not knowing the country. But he had a general idea of its topography. He knew where the Quarter Circle D home ranch lay and the location of the drift fence. And he was riding a big grain-fed Quarter Circle D gelding. The horse would take him there if he kept a slack rein.

Marcy had staked Bill to the big brown gelding. And when she knew he was bound to go alone, she gave him an accurate description of the country between the two ranches and the location of several secret key gates in the barbed-wire drift fence. Places where the fence crossed cut coulees and the wires were so fastened to the fence posts that the key staples could be lifted and the wires raised and a man could lead his horse under the wires and key them back in place on the posts. There was the off chance, she said, that Rafe Millsap's fence riders knew about the key gates Jim Dixon had made in the drift fence long before Millsap moved in to take over with his renegades. Jim Dixon and Marcy used those hidden gates. Even Rick knew nothing about them. Only Jim Dixon and Marcy Valentine.

Bill Ripley had winced a little inside when Marcy spoke so intimately of Jim Dixon. But when he got ready to mount, she had put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Hard. Bruising her soft lips against his mouth. A sob in her throat and her green eyes misted with unshed tears. And Bill had held her and kissed her hungrily, roughly, clumsily.

"Come back, Rip," she'd whispered, her voice husky.

Bill Ripley would come back if he had to shoot every mile of the trail back to the Valentine ranch. No girl had ever moved him like that. But Marcy Valentine was no girl. She was a woman. Older, the twenty-five-year-old Bill Ripley suspected, than he was. There were tiny lines etched around the corners of her green eyes and her red-lipped mouth. Marcy Valentine could be as old as thirty. Too old for Bill Ripley.

"Git a tail holt on yourself, Rip," he told himself savagely. But his heart pounded hot blood through his veins. He'd fight his way through hell to get back to the green-eyed, black-haired, red-lipped Marcy. And she was in love with Jim Dixon.

"She as much as told me so. Hang onto your bushy tail, Rip. Come out of it."

The big pole gate in the drift fence loomed up. So close ahead that he sucked in his breath through clenched teeth and slid his six-shooter from its holster.

He sighted the man on horseback, there on the other side of the pole gate. He sensed, rather than saw the man lift his gun, and he shot a split-second before the man's gun spat fire. Shot to kill.

The man's horse whirled and stam-

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peded. The rider went over backwards and landed with a heavy crash on his head and shoulders and lay there motionless.

Bill Ripley spurred up to the gate. Its chain hung down, the padlock open. The man he'd shot must have just unlocked the big padlock and had been about to open the pole gate and ride through.

Maybe he'd killed Jim Dixon. No time to stop. Anyway, he wouldn't know Jim Dixon if he found him dead. Bill Ripley leaned from his saddle and pulled the long wooden gate pin. Riding through, he shut and padlocked the gate behind him and lifted the big brown gelding to a run. He heard a man shout, another man yell back some kind of reply. And Bill Ripley rode like the devil was at his heels. The dead man's horse had fouled its dragging bridle reins in some brush.

Bill Ripley quit the wagon road and kept to the brush. It was only about five miles to the ranch and he slowed down to a long trot, letting the big brown gelding get its wind. Then he pulled up when he sighted the dim blobs of lighted cabin windows. He rode in behind the heavy willow thicket that flanked the creek, left his horse there, and went on afoot, his saddle carbine in the crook of his left arm. He made out the scattered buildings and pole corrals.

VI

A light showed dimly behind drawn blinds in the main house. A rambling one-storied log house. Rip stepped up on the wide porch and opened the door without knocking. His six-shooter was in his right hand, carbine in the crook of his left arm.

Then he stood rooted in his tracks. The door opened directly into a large room. A big lamp was set on a large table and a girl of about nineteen sat in a rocking chair reading a book. She had curly copper-colored hair and a lot of freckles and dark-brown eyes. She was wearing a clean but faded blue flannel man's shirt and faded Levi overalls and a pair of shabby boots that hung by silver-mounted spurs from the scarred edge of the heavy home-made table. She let the book lower, marking the place with her forefinger, and grinned boyishly at him, showing white teeth.

"Whew!" Her full red lips pursed in a whistle. "Scared me green. I'm readin' 'Sherlock Holmes and the Hound of the Baskervilles.' Out on the moor; that big slavering hound. Like Marcy Valentine's black Satan. . . . Take off your hat and rest your guns, mister. If you're lookin' for Jim, he ain't here. If it's Whit you're gunnin' for, he's got you covered."

The rowels of the silver-mounted spurs raked the scarred table top. The girl opened the book again and read, or pretended to read.

"Reg'lar bookworm," drawled a man's voice from behind a huge gay-colored Navajo rug that shut off the hallway. "But a top cowhand anywhere you put 'er. And she's a good shore hand with a green bronc. Cooks a bang-up meal when she's a mind to, and makes all her own clothes. And there's a horse and saddle goes with her. . . . Her name's Dixie Dixon."

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Bill Ripley had shoved his six-shooter back into its holster and leaned his saddle carbine against the wall and pulled his hat off. He stood there awkwardly, red-eared, his hat in his hand.

The man who came out from behind the curtain shoved a long-barreled six-shooter into its open holster. He was short, wiry, with a leathery face, graying red hair and puckered bright black eyes that missed no detail of Bill Ripley's looks.

"You ain't one of Rafe Millsap's renegades." He was soft-spoken with an easy grin. "Mebby Jim sent yuh?"

"No, sir. I rode over from the Valentine place. . . . We got rid of Troy. I'm ramroddin' the outfit. Hirin' back Zed's old hands. I come here to see what kin be done about smokin' out Rafe Millsap. Kind of clean up both outfits. My name's Bill Ripley—"

"Your name is mud, you smart Aleck!"

Troy's rasping voice came from the doorway. Bill Ripley had not shut the door. It had swung open behind him and Troy stood there, grinning, a gun in his left hand, the whip welts ridged on his dark face.

Troy stepped inside, his gun pointed at Bill Ripley's belly. And the tall rawboned cowpuncher who crowded in behind Troy was, Rip reckoned, Rafe Millsap.

Rafe Millsap was on the younger side of thirty. Lantern-jawed, light-haired, with a high-bridged nose and pale-blue eyes. Young, tough and merciless, he was a cold-blooded killer. He pushed past Troy who stood just inside the doorway, and walked over to where the girl Dixie sat in her rocker, so white now that her freckles were a black smudge. Fear and loathing in her eyes as she shrank away from Rafe Millsap's pawing hand.

"Keep your filthy paws off my daughter!" Whit Dixon stepped forward.

Rafe Millsap's six-shooter chopped down across Dixon's head, knocking him backwards. Millsap's buck teeth bared in a nasty grin.

"Take it easy, pappy!" His voice was a nasal whine.

Bill Ripley dared not make a move. Yet. Troy's gun was a hair-triggered six-shooter ready to blast his guts out. There was murder in Troy's pale bloodshot eyes. Whit Dixon had grabbed hold of the edge of the table to steady himself. Blood was oozing from his ripped scalp.

Bill Ripley winced a little under the quick contemptuous look Dixie Dixon cut him. Rafe Millsap stank of bad whiskey. He pawed at the girl again, a leering grin on his muddy yellow-colored face. She twisted away and kicked him hard in the shins. Millsap let out a yelp of pain and stumbled after her as she dodged in behind her father.

But Bill Ripley was not watching the girl and Millsap. He was watching Troy. Troy was taking it all in with a thin-lipped grin, but his pale eyes were fixed on Bill Ripley. And Troy's back was to the open doorway so he could not see what Ripley saw. A black shape that

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moved without a sound, crouched, with white fangs bared and yellow eyes shining in the dark. Without a warning growl the big black Dane Satan sprang. Long, powerful jaws clamping down, sharp white fangs buried deep in the back and side of Troy's neck. Troy let out a horrible scream. The gun in his hand exploded.

Bill Ripley threw himself sideways and the bullet whined past his head. He jerked his gun and whirled, intending to shoot at Rafe Millsap. But Millsap had grabbed Dixie and Bill Ripley dared not risk a shot for fear of hitting the girl. Millsap's gun spat flame and Bill Ripley felt the burning, thudding impact of the bullet grazing his ribs. He cleared the table and crashed heavily into Millsap and the girl and the three of them went down in a tangled pile. Then Dixie scrambled free.

Troy's injured right hand and arm had gone up to protect his throat as the Dane knocked him off his feet. Troy shoved his hand and forearm blindly into the dog's mouth, clubbing at the black Dane's massive head. Then blood spilled from Troy's torn neck and his horrible screams filled the room. The dog's fangs ripped and slashed.

Meanwhile out yonder in the smoky night there sounded the pounding of shod hoofs and guns roaring and men shouting hoarsely. And the voice of one man lifted above the other sounds.

"Git at 'em, you forty-a-month ol' rannyhans. Charge 'em, Zed!"

"Jim! Jim!" yelled Dixie Dixon.

Whit Dixon stood with blood trickling into his eyes, knocked out but still on his feet, his gun in his hand but too blind from blood and too dazed to see what to shoot at.

Bill Ripley heard the confusion only dimly. He saw nothing but the ugly lantern-jawed face of Rafe Millsap. Saw that face through a red film of hate. And for the first time in his life Bill Ripley wanted to kill a man with his bare hands. He wanted to kill Rafe Millsap for the simple reason that the tough young renegade had manhandled that red-headed freckle-faced girl who was a bookworm but a top cowhand and had a way with a green bronc but could cook a bang-up meal and make her own clothes. . . .

Rafe Millsap clubbed at Rip's head with his gun barrel. Bill Ripley grabbed the gun with both hands as it chopped down, yanking hard and pulling Millsap sideways and down and off-balance. Jerking the gun free, he threw it away. Bill didn't realize he'd dropped his own gun in his headlong red hate, his savage determination to kill this vicious, snarling renegade with his bare hands. And he grabbed Millsap's throat with his left hand and his right fist smashed short vicious blows into Rafe Millsap's sweaty face. Bones crunched under the hammering blows. And Bill Ripley felt no pain when Millsap gouged and pounded and shoved his head down till his big yellow teeth sank into Rip's shoulder. Then Millsap was on top of Rip, his big weight crushing him against the floor. Somehow Bill managed to get both his hands

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on Rafe Millsap's throat and clamped down and tightened his grip, holding it as though he had steel springs in his fingers. He did not know when Rafe Millsap's teeth slacked their biting punishment, when Rafe Millsap's big dirty-nailed fingers quit clawing and gouging. Then a red blood smear blinded Bill Ripley and there was a tremendous weight holding him down, a dead limp weight now.

The room filled with sounds. Zed Valentine's booming growl.

"Blast it, Marcy, call off that black houn'!"

The shooting had stopped outside. Cold water splashed down on Bill Ripley's blood-smeared head and face and he heard Zed Valentine's growl.

"Hell's cinders, Rip, slack your grip. Hate to have to cut yuh loose. Let go, Rip. Millsap's finished!"

But there was a red film blinding Bill Ripley and they were putting cold wet bandages on his eyes. And somebody was washing his face and head. And there was the taste of raw whiskey in his mouth. He heard Marcy Valentine's voice.

"Take it easy, Rip. It's all over but the shouting."

"Gosh, Marcy, he just threw away his gun and came over the table and wow! He nailed 'im! I got a bloody nose."

That was Dixie's voice. Excited. Bill Ripley pawed off the bandages and blinked away the red film. But it was not Marcy or Dixie he saw. It was a big black Dane's head, tongue lolling, white fangs showing, yellow eyes looking down into his. Then the big red tongue swiped him alongside the head and Bill reached up and rubbed the massive sleek black head. Then the huge black Dane lay down alongside him. On guard.

"Whew!" gasped Dixie Dixon's voice. "For a second, I was scared green."

"Looks like I've lost a dog," said Marcy. She bent down and kissed Bill Ripley. "The big tramp followed you, Rip."

A red-headed cowpuncher with a homely freckled face lifted Marcy to her feet and gave her a hard quick hug. Then squatted on his spurred boot heels and gripped Bill Ripley's hand.

"I'm Jim Dixon. We got to thank you for a lot, Rip. Me. My kid sister Dixie. My dad Whit. . . . Zed and I was too far behind when we left the Valentine ranch to do you much good here. So was Marcy and her hounds. But the old Valentine Heart and Quarter Circle D cowpunchers took Troy's and Millsap's renegades like kids eatin' candy."

"Rick fetched 'em?"

"No. I went down to the river camp a couple of days ago. Hired 'em all back for both outfits. . . . We found Rick near the Valentine ranch. Troy's renegades had killed him. But he got two of 'em before he died. Rick Valentine died a-fightin'."

Jim Dixon had never seen those I.O.U.s until Marcy showed them to him. Rick had lost that money to Troy and Troy had made out the

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I.O.U.s in Jim Dixon's name. He had hoped to make Marcy hate Jim Dixon, the one and only man she loved, she told them all.

"Jim's so doggoned homely," she explained.

And it was Jim Dixon who explained about the stolen cattle. A lot of cattle were being trailed out of Wyoming. There was a range war down there. Cowmen were trailing their cattle to Montana before the rustlers whittled on 'em. Selling cattle cheap. Troy and Millsap had pointed such a trail herd to Montana. They'd showed Jim Dixon bills of sale for the irons in the mixed herd. Jim Dixon and Rick Valentine, repping for the Valentine Heart and Dixon Quarter Circle D, had paid cash for the cattle. And it wasn't until the cattle were branded in the Heart and Quarter Circle D that Jim Dixon and Rick Valentine learned that the bills of sale were forgeries and they had a lot of stolen cattle in their irons. From then on it was blackmail. Troy and Rafe Millsap moved in with their renegades. They fired the old cowhands and spread the rumor of a range war between the two outfits. And they threatened the Valentines and Dixons with prison for handling stolen cattle.

Most of those Wyoming cattle wore the Rocking R brand. Bill Ripley said he and his father had owned the Rocking R. U. S. Marshal Hank Ripley was too busy to spend much time at the ranch. He'd shown up in time to side his son Bill in a tough one-sided gun fight with the cattle rustlers. The running gun fight had happened at night with a stampede of a big herd Bill Ripley had gathered. But Bill Ripley said he reckoned Troy and Rafe Millsap had ramrodded the night-raiding rustlers. The same renegade pack that was now wiped out. U. S. Marshal Hank Ripley had been killed. For weeks Bill Ripley had lain flat on his back in a hospital bed fighting for his life. It was months before he could sit a horse again. Then he had sold the ranch in Wyoming, put his father's law badge in his pocket, and took the cold trail of his stolen cattle.

"They're yours, Rip," said Marcy. "Putting tallow on their ribs on a new range. Free grazing. And you've got to stay with us till they're gathered this fall and shipped. Till after our wedding. Doesn't he have to stay, Jim?"

"I need him for best man," grinned the red-headed, freckled Jim Dixon.

Zed Valentine and Whit Dixon were getting slowly, quietly, drunk. Cussing one another. Swapping their top horses.

Somehow they all drifted outside. And only Dixie and Bill Ripley—Rip in clean clothes and both eyes discolored and swollen to slits and his face battered-looking—were left there in the big room that had been cleaned up. Big Satan was stretched out at Rip's feet. Dixie moved in her chair and the big dog got up and walked over to her and shoved his massive head into her lap. She gave a little start of surprise and then began gently rubbing the swollen lumps where Troy's gun barrel had struck glancing blows before his

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jugular vein was torn and he'd died horribly.

"The hound of the Baskervilles!" Dixie shuddered. "I'll never be able to finish that book. Not while I'm alone." But she buried her curly red head in Satan's sleek black shoulder.

Bill Ripley squatted on his boot heels beside the big dog and took her hand. And somehow he managed to tell Dixie Dixon that he was in love with her. He'd known it the second Rafe Millsap had pawed her. So that was why he had to throw away his gun and fight Rafe Millsap with his hands.

"Sounds locoed, don't it?" he grinned.

"Nope. Not to me; it doesn't sound anything but grand, Rip. Only I was scared you'd take days, even weeks to get around to it."

"Then you'll marry me, Dixie?"

"Whenever you say, Rip. My horse and saddle goes with me, Whit said. I think you'd better kiss me now. . . ."

Bill Ripley kissed her. Satan swiped the backs of their necks with his tongue, then stalked outside with a great Dane's splendid dignity.

Out to where Jim Dixon and Marcy sat in the porch swing. Marcy rubbed the big dog's ears.

"It worked, Jim. When Satan walked over and shoved his head into Dixie's lap, Rip took the hint. Rip remembered something I said to him. About Satan picking out a man for me. I was just teasing Rip. He's so darned bashful."

"He does all right for a backward country boy," grinned Jim Dixon. "Say! I just remembered something. The day that big black pup of yours made up to me like that and you said he'd picked out a man for you. And that gave me the nerve to tell you you had to marry me. Remember?"

Marcy's green eyes softened. She laughed huskily and kissed him.

"You better change his name. From Satan . . . to Cupid."

And at the far end of the porch Whit Dixon and Zed Valentine clinked filled glasses and grinned in the smoky moonlight.

"Double weddin', Zed."

"Double weddin', Whit."

They downed their drinks and smashed the empty glasses.

THE END

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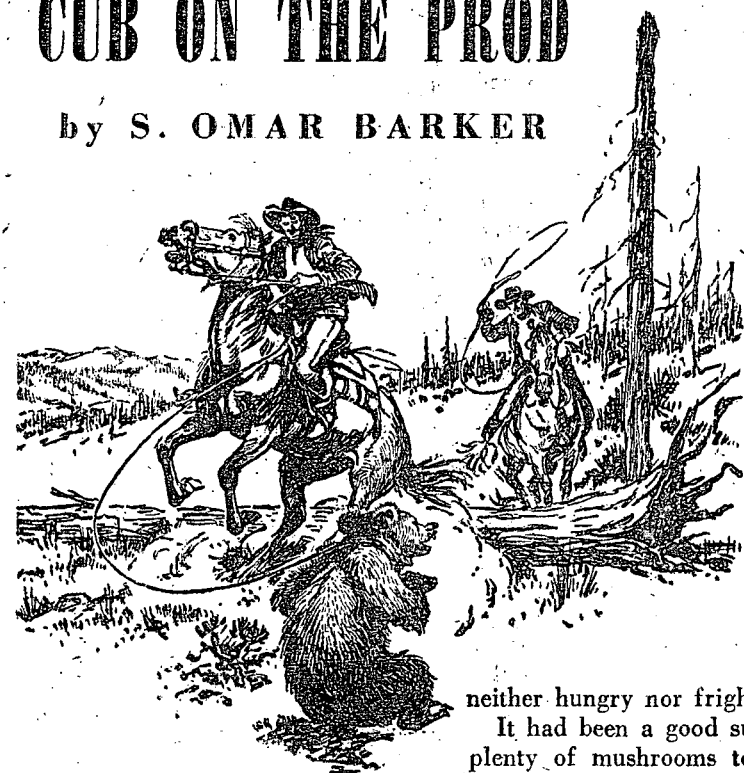
His first day on his own taught Osito a valuable lesson—that life is no bowl of berries for a

CUB ON THE PROD

by S. OMAR BARKER



At the rim of Chokecherry Canyon the straw-brown-hued she-bear padded across a ramp of bare reddish sandstone and paused at the edge, her moist black snout quivering as she tested the wind for whatever significant scent it might carry, either of food or danger. The sniffing gesture was purely routine, for she was neither hungry nor frightened.

It had been a good summer, with plenty of mushrooms to fatten on, garnished by lip-smacking red raspberries along the rocky creeks, with an occasional treat of rich-stinking carrion from the carcasses of several dead cows to which her nose had led her. Not that she had killed any cows herself. Despite the deadly power of her shaggy forearms and vicelike jaws, the she-cinnamon was not a killer. Kill she could, of course, and kill she would if hunger

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or attack demanded it. Or perhaps if the opportunity happened to catch her in an evil temper. But by nature she preferred to placid life of feeding on bugs and berries, roots, mushrooms, acorns and carrion.

Her two six-months-old cubs were as black as tar buckets except for small areas of cinnamon brown around their muzzles. The smaller one, a female, followed close at her mother's shaggy rump. Usually it was her playful brother who crowded the lead, but now he was loitering several yards behind, pausing every now and then to sit down and gnaw at his heel.

The she-cub moved up at a slap-footed, loose-jointed gait, then raised her head to go through the motions of sniffing the wind exactly as the old bear had done. This filial duty performed, she turned, arching her back a little, and sidled across the table rock to meet her lagging brother.

As he clambered up onto the rock, she cocked a droll paw as if to smack him on the snout, but waited instead until he was past, then nipped at one of his hams. It was no more than the usual invitation to a round of the rough but good-humored sparring and wrestling at which they almost constantly played. But now, to her alarmed surprise, the little blackie whirled savagely and struck her hard across the snout. With a little whining sound she backed away, then sidled forward again. By her every movement the other cub must have known that all she wanted was to play, yet instead of responding in kind, he snarled and bit her on the forearm.

Though she had intended no aggression, the little she-cub was not born to be an appeaser, either. The fang rip was painful, and it made her mad. With a squall of sudden wrath she took to him. Like a pair of grotesque little wrestlers, snarling and grunting, they rolled over and over on the flat stone, locked in comic but none the less deadly combat.

For a moment the old bear paid no attention, then suddenly sensed that this ruckus was not merely rowdy play, but a fight. She growled warningly low in her throat, then took quick, maternal action to stop it. Out of the tangle of battling cubs she yanked one by a mouth-hold on the tough, loose skin of the back of the neck, at the same time boxing the other one away with a hard slap of her paw.

It happened that the one she boxed was Osito Negro, the he-cub whose ill temper had started the fight. The blow bowled him over, but, like a trained tumbler, he bounced to his feet and struck back at her. The she-bear, like any other Mother Bruin, was a fond and doting parent, but she also believed in discipline. There were a good many things she sometimes let her cubs get away with, but smacking mamma on the snoot was not one of them. This time her big paw knocked Osito Negro neatly over the canyonside rim of the big flat rock.

Scrub-oak brush broke the force of his twelve-foot fall to the steep, ledgy hillside so well that Osito was

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not seriously hurt, but the effect on his already evil temper was anything but soothing. Still the squall he let out had something of pain as well as anger in it. Hearing it, the she-bear came to the rim and looked over. Already Osito was on his feet again and traveling away from there. Not fast, but at a blundering, impetuous gait that sent him crashing heedlessly through the dry undertwigs of the scrub oak.

The old bear made a low, whining, persuasive noise with which to call him back, but Osito paid no heed. He stopped once to sit down and dig with his small front teeth at the black heel pad of his left hind foot, then went on out of sight below a brushy ledge.

Though there was anxiety in her small eyes as she watched him go, the old cinnamon did not follow. Instead she presently struck out at a contouring slant that would bring her into the canyon a mile farther up, where a thicket of chokeberry bushes would be black with clusters of ripe, puckery fruit with which to top off the night's foraging in the brief hour of moonlight still remaining before dawn. Docilely the little she-cub followed, close at heel now that she no longer had a companion to loiter and frolic with.

Had the bust-up happened a month earlier, undoubtedly the mother bruin would not have gone off and left her errant young un to follow or not as he pleased. But her attitude now seemed to be that her runaway cub was big enough to make his way back "home" to her side whenever he got ready.

Whether, like a human mother, she actually tried to worry out the reason for her cub's spell of ill-tempered misbehavior, seems doubtful. Yet in her small brain there did lurk a vague surmise about the matter; an uneasy suspicion that it had to do with her own fooling around too freely at a spot where the scent of Man was still fresh and strong. Not that the strange-smelling, two-legged animal had ever done anything to her personally to make her fear him alone among all creatures. Yet to a degree she did suspect and fear him, instinctively, as an enemy.

Earlier that night, however, she had let curiosity get the better of instinctive caution. The mixture of pleasant scents rising from under a spruce clump in Campocito Canyon where Mike Melhorn had recently made camp, had been too tempting, and she had ventured to investigate. To the cubs the abandoned camp site had proved particularly interesting. The dirt where Melhorn had poured out a dribble of bacon grease had a new and fascinating flavor. A stub of rotting stump on which he had spilled sugar, they literally tore apart to lick at the sprinkling of sweetness in it.

Nosing eagerly around they also found the spot where the cowboy had shod a horse. The strange, strong flavor of hoof parings fascinated them so much that they began shoving each other pretty roughly away from them. It was at this point that Osito Negro had suddenly begun to act mean, and from then on, for the whole three miles up to the rim

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of Chokecherry Canyon, his temper had grown increasingly bad.

What ailed him his mother had no idea, yet instinctively she blamed man-scent for it. Hurrying away from the abandoned camp site, there stirred in her brain the vague memory of a big black bear with whom she had once mated, struggling helplessly in a huge, cruel steel trap, while she watched fearfully, then fled in terror. She did not know that the trap was Man's penalty on the big black for having killed a yearling. To her the whole terrifying occurrence was closely associated with the scent of humans, who seemed somehow able to inflict pain and death even when they were not themselves present.

Thus, in her crude, instinctive mental processes, the old she-cinnamon blamed Man for whatever ailed her cub. Next time she smelled an abandoned camp she would avoid it. But now what she wanted was a full belly, topped off with chokecherries, on which to lie up for the coming day. That Osito Negro would rejoin her in his own good time, she seemed to have no doubt.

As for that little black hellion himself, what he was most aware of, as he grumbled his crooked way down into the canyon, was that his foot hurt, that his jaw ached where Ma Bruin had smacked him, that there was pain in the ribs bruised by his fall, and that—doggonit—he was mad! Mad at everything and everybody!

Puddling around in the cold mud and water of Chokecherry Creek didn't make him feel much better. He struck out across the next ridge still in a snarly temper. When he jumped a cottontail and failed to catch it, he tore into the rockpile into which the rabbit had vanished, as furiously as if it were a deadly enemy rather than a mere morsel of food that he was after. When he failed to dig the rabbit out, he was madder than ever.

By the time high sunlight over the aspen tops warned him it was time to hole up for the day in the cover of some dense thicket, he was already clear over in the grassy glades of Calf Canyon where there were no thickets.

Here there were cattle, and here, purely by chance, Osito Negro came upon a calf lying snugged close under a snowberry bush where its mother had left it hidden while she went to grass in the *vega* a hundred yards away. Heretofore the cub, like his mother, had eyed cattle with only a mild curiosity and let them alone. But now his failure to dig out the rabbit still rankled and in his heart were the makings of a killer.

Not yet a week old, the red calf lay as flat to the ground as a bovine can, his white head outstretched, every muscle still. He had both heard and seen the bear, and under his sleek ribs his heart pounded with fear. Yet he did not move so much as an eyelash. Less than half an hour ago he had nursed his fill of warm sweet milk, and here his mother had bid him lie until she returned. In range cattle some of the protective instincts of wild creatures

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have never been lost through domestication. Just as a deer doe hides her fawn, so range cows hide their calves, and the instinct of young calves to obey and lie still until otherwise ordered is strong.

Some twenty feet away the young bear paused to sniff the pleasant fresh-milk scent of the little whiteface. Slowly the hackles rose on the high, narrow hump of his shoulders, then he padded swiftly forward to the attack. Not until the bear was within two yards of him did the calf's obedience yield to fear. Then, with a sudden, wild-eyed blatt of distress he scrambled to his feet and ran.

Instead of rushing in to seize hold of the calf with his teeth, with the callow inexperience of his extreme youth, the cub lunged and struck with his paw instead, barely knocking the calf off balance as his clawed toes raked its red rump.

The calf's frantic bellowing excited Osito Negro and fed his anger. Dropping again to all fours, he crashed through the snowberry bushes in hot pursuit. Few four-legged creatures can outrun a bear. Within forty yards Osito was alongside the fleeing calf again. This time his upper lips were curled a little, uncovering white fangs ready, at the next lunge, to seize and hold and kill.

The little bear had not reckoned, however, with the inevitable results of the calf's bellering. The instant her baby's first blatt of distress reached her ears the mother cow had swung up her head and come on the run, a tuft of unchewed grass still dangling from her jaws. Now suddenly, before Osito realized what was happening, she charged him head-on, her eyes abulge, her head lowered, the deadly up-curve of her sharp horns gleaming in the sun.

Osito Negro recovered from the momentum of his speed barely in time to sidestep her first vicious lunge. With the loose-jointed dexterity of an acrobat, he threw himself into a sidelong tumble down the hill. Then one curved horn hooked momentarily in his crotch and heaved him heels over head. Osito squalled, but came to his feet snapping viciously at the old cow's lowered nose. He had no desire to make a fight of it, however; he only wanted to stand her off long enough to make his getaway. Luckily the old cow's concern for the whereabouts of her calf caused her to retreat momentarily in search of it.

It was Osito's chance to clear out, and he knew it. But when he turned to run, the glade all around him seemed suddenly to be full of snuffing, bawling cattle, all on the prod and all converging on him. From canyon and *vega*, from hillside and thicket, the bellering of cow and calf had brought them.

None of them, fortunately, seemed to have quite the dander for such a direct frontal attack as the calf's mother had made, but they did have him encircled.

Backed up against a thick mat of snowberry bushes, he reared to face them, snarling and popping his teeth. Small as he was, it was a most effective bluff. In their maternal hysteria two or three old cows

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charged him, but each time swerved away a foot or two before contact.

Gradually, as if realizing that they had the little bear "buffaloed" to such a point that he no longer offered any immediate threat to their offspring, the cows slackened their attack, turning off one by one to run mooing to their calves and scatter up the canyon.

Osito Negro was still in a bad humor, but he was no fool. At the first opportunity he turned and nosed his way into the snowberry bush he had used for a back-stop, shoved through to the other side and took out at a fast, comic run across the glade toward thicker timber.

Hearing the distressed bellering of cattle from a little distance down Calf Canyon, Mike Melhorn had socked the hooks to his cow pony and come on the run. Now he came quartering into the glade at a gallop just in time to intercept Osito Negro as he fled. Mike Melhorn was a cowboy, young and full of vinegar—and he had never yet roped a bear. Whether or not this black cub was the sole cause of his cattle's disturbance he did not know. But the temptation of the situation was too great. The acts of jerking a loop into his rope and socking spurs to his pony's ribs were instant and simultaneous. Quartering across Osito Negro's course, he dabbed a small, swift, brush-popper's loop over the little bear's head not a dozen yards before he reached the shelter of timber.

Mike's pony "made his figure elevens" for an instant, solid stop. Osito hit the end of the rope going fast and hard. It yanked him end for end, a full yard in the air, and brought him to earth with a plop that knocked nine-tenths of the wind out of him. Nevertheless, with what little wind he had left, Osito Negro squalled weakly, scrambled up and fought the rope with tooth and paw.

Lest he bite the semi-taut rope in two, Mike Melhorn heeled his pony's ribs, aiming to give the cub a little slack, then jerk him down again to take the spizzerinktum out of him. But the pony had other ideas. Now that the excitement of running for the catch was over, the sight and smell of a bear, even a small one, on the end of a thirty-three foot rope, was too much for the salty little buckskin's nerves. With rollers in his nose he refused to obey either rein or spur, starting instead to rear and cut up with the one idea of getting the hell away from there. The cowboy's quiet voice tried to soothe him, but without much luck.

His plunging contortions, however, did give Osito a little slack, which the cub promptly used up by trying again to run away. After about three painful, choking jerks on his neck when he hit the end of the rope, the little bear apparently decided that the only way to run was in a direction where he could get some place. He seemed to have discovered that whenever he came nearer the horse and man, the choking thing around his neck seemed to loosen. This loosening, even though the thing was still there, gave him each time the feeling that he was free. Yet every time he tried to run *away* from the horse the thing jerked tight again.

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What more simple, then, than to run *toward* his captor, dodge past him and make his escape in the other direction?

Let it be said for Osito that he had no intention of attacking either horse or man—unless he had to. But the pony didn't know that. To him the smell of a small bear was as fearful and terrifying as if it had been an eight-hundred-pound grizzly. At Osito's first move to try his new strategy, plainly the pony's reaction was "here he comes! I'm a-gonna git outa here!"

Prevented from following this impulse by the cowboy's firm hand on the reins, the salty little buckskin swallered his head and let in to buck.

Riding a bucking horse "plain" is one thing. Riding one with a bear, however small, on the other end of your tied-fast rope, with every prospect of getting dangerously tangled up in same, is a wolf of another color.

Mike Melhorn managed to stay on top through the first spasm, but when the pony took second wind for another spell, with the bear cub steadily circling and tangling them up, the cowboy began looking for a place to land.

It was at this point that a second result of the cattle's bellering showed up. Clear up on Buckhead Ridge another rider named Hiccup Smith had heard them. By men who look after cattle in the mountains, such signals of disturbance are never ignored. Now he reined up in the glade a few yards away from the bear-horse merry-go-round, hiccuped a couple of times and grinned.

"Whu-what you been duh-doin', Mike?" he inquired genially. "Ruh-ropin' you a bear?"

Whether Mike was too gentlemanly or just too busy to answer, nobody will ever know. After watching the show with casual interest for a moment or two, Hiccup Smith leisurely and methodically let down his lass rope, built a loop, edged in closer and picked up Osito's Negro's heels.

How cowboys and cow horses get themselves out of the kind of a tangle Mike Melhorn and his pony were in, is one the mysteries of God's great outdoors, as unfathomable to the ordinary human mind as it must have been to the little black bear cub. But they do—and somehow Mike Melhorn did, so that presently he and Hiccup Smith had the black cub rope-stretched between them.

"Well, Mike," grinned Hiccup. "Whu-what you want to do with him? Make a pet of him for that curly-topped gal you been courtin'?"

Mike shook his head.

"A bear ain't like a dog, Hiccup," he said. "They like it better out on their own. Damned if I even know what I roped the little cuss for."

Now that the bear lay still, neatly stretched out between the two horses, Mike's pony had quieted down.

Hiccup fished out his jacknife, tested the blade with his thumb, then stepped off his horse and started toward the hard-breathing but otherwise quiet cub.

"Hold on a minute!" Mike Melhorn also dismounted, and came toward him. "It ain't so much violatin'

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the game law that I care about, Hiccup," he said. "But let's don't kill the little booger. He—"

"Huh-hell, I ain't aimin' to kill him," grinned Hiccup, "I'm jest go-in' to earmark him, that's all!"

As the two men bent over him, Osito Negro's last dregs of courage seemed to drain out of him. He whimpered, a small, snuffly, pitiful sound.

Hiccup Smith let go of the ear he had seized, without cutting it. He folded shut his knife blade with a calloused thumb.

"Shu-shucks, Mike," he grunted. "What the hu-hell would a man want to earmark a bear for, anyways? If we turn him a-loose, you reckon he'll know where to find his mammy?"

Evidently Mike Melhorn thought he would. He knelt with one knee on the cub's hind legs, to loosen the rope with what little slack he could tug against the pull of Hiccup's horse, aiming to shove the cub forward without letting him up so that Hiccup would have slack enough to release his head. But suddenly he stopped.

"Hold on a minute, Hiccup," he said, running the balls of his fingers over the obviously swollen black pad of Osito's right hind heel. "This little booger's got somethin' in his foot. Gimme that knife a minute!"

Osito whimpered again, but was too scared to squall while the sharp blade of the knife gouged and dug into his heel.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Mike grunted presently. He wiped the blood off a shiny, dagger-pointed piece of metal not over half an inch long and held it up between thumb and finger. "Where you reckon he ever happened to step on that?"

"Duh-don't ask me," shrugged Hiccup Smith. "You ready to turn him a-loose? I done got my tree picked if he takes after me!"

But when they turned him loose, Osito Negro tarried not to take after anybody. With half a dozen long, lumbering lopes the timber hid him.

That night, traveling over the ridge toward the head of Chokecherry Canyon in search of the mother and sister he had so unceremoniously abandoned, the little black cub still limped. But already his foot felt better and his spell of ill-temper—which if long continued might have made a mean-natured killer out of him—was definitely over.

The clipped-off point of a horseshoe nail that he had stepped on while nosing around where Mike Melhorn had shod a horse, had resulted in putting him through some pretty harrowing but instructive experiences. Now, no matter how big and brawny he ever grew to be, Osito would always be wary of the scent of man—and perhaps of cattle, too—a most valuable asset for "safety first" in any bear's woods.

Now when a drift of breeze brought him the smell of his mother and sister, mingled with the ripe aroma of chokecherries, the black cub let out an anxious little whimper born of his growing lonesomeness, and struck out eagerly to find them.

THE END

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RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

THE Plains Indians' system of communication by means of signs was one of the most effective sign-languages ever devised. Originally developed because of linguistic differences among the various nomadic tribes, it was extremely useful to the early trappers who first pushed into the West, and later to the military. With a little practice, sign talk wasn't hard to savvy. For instance an elk was indicated by raising the arms elbow high above the head and spreading out the fingers.

Distributing salt over the range by team and wagon is one of the laborious, time-consuming chores on many Western cattle spreads, but a certain Oregon cattleman has a different way of doing it. This air-minded cowman flies his own plane over his range, bombing it with blocks of stock salt at the required places. Half a ton of salt can be distributed in an hour by air—a job that took four days under the team and wagon system. Warned that the bombing technique would not be practical because the salt blocks would break up when they hit the ground, the rancher rode over the range to check and reported only one block broken.

Sage grouse—more commonly known as sage hens—were once abundant in the Great Basin region of the West. Protected now to save the remaining few from extinction, they provided many a meal for the early Western traveler, and many a surprise to the uninitiated in preparing the birds for the pot. Instead of the expected strong, muscular gizzard common to domestic chickens and most grouselike birds the sage hen's stomach is only a thin-walled sac. The sage hen can apparently digest its diet of insects, green vegetation and sage leaves in winter without a gizzard.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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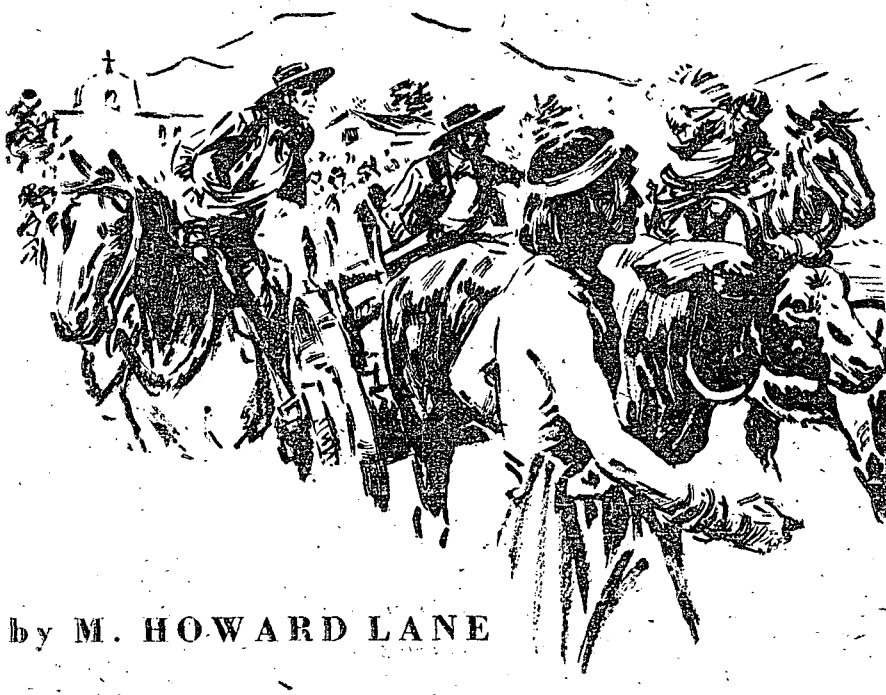

by M. HOWARD LANE

TRIGGER TRAP

I

THE white road from Rancho Tres Reyes lay before them, and the adobes and the bright blue of San Pedro's bay could be seen ahead. So could the masts of the schooner, *Mary Belle,* waving gently against the pale California sky. Her holds, Bent Castille reflected, would be full of Tres Reyes cattle, San Francisco bound to feed the hungry hordes that were coming from over the world to search for El Dorado gold. Some of those Argonauts would find it, and some of them wouldn't, Bent thought grimly, but certainly all of them had to eat.

That was the truism he'd expressed to his father, and Juan Carrillo on the shady veranda of their hacienda as they'd watched vaqueros line out the herd that had come here to fill the hold of the *Mary Belle.*

"A hundred prime steers. That's all the *Belle* will carry," Bent had said quietly. "San Francisco will

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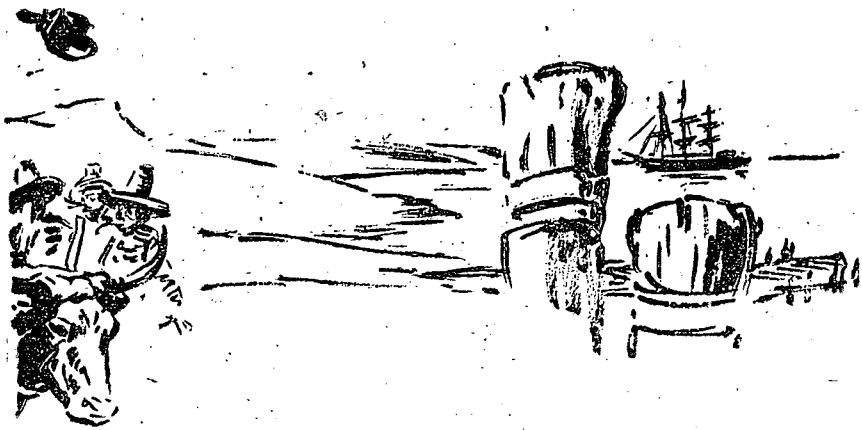

When Bent Castille found San Francisco's hungry miners eating beef stolen from Tres Reyes, he realized it would take gunpowder, not gold, to pay off those swindling land sharks

FOR RUSTLERS

gobble them, hides, hoofs, and horns, overnight!"

"And them cussed money grabbers in Los Angeles will gobble what we get for 'em before it's warm in our hands," old Tom Castille had agreed morosely. "So what's the answer, son?"

Ben's tawny eyes had started to glow. "A drive," he said grimly. "A drive up the coast to San Francisco!"

"Weeth wan thousand cattle," Juan Carrillo's round face had started to beam. "*Dios*, but that would be something!"

"I misdoubt if it can be done," Tom Castille had grunted. "And even if it could and the price warn't right, we'd lose what's left of our shirts and Tres Reyes, to boot."

"We're going to lose it if we don't take the chance," Bent had told his father bluntly. "Cliff Carscadden, from over Conejo way, is aching to join his ranch with ours. He's tied

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up with Shay Peralta in Los Angeles, and Peralta holds our paper."

So the three had laid their careful plans. Bent was to take passage north on the *Mary Belle,* and contact San Francisco buyers. Juan Carrillo was to ride up the coast, mapping a route that a Southern California trail herd might follow to the bay.

"We'll meet there," Bent had said, "and ride back together, Juan. By the time we get here your vaqueros can comb a herd out of the mountains that will make anything seen around these parts look like two bits. How about it, amigos?" he'd ended with a grin. "Does the plan suit your fancy?"

"Down to the hilt." A dry smile had touched Tom Castille's lips. "But it ain't going to suit Peralta and Carscadden if you put 'er over! Remember that and keep a tight tongue in your heads when we hit San Pedro."

"We?" Bent exclaimed, startled.

"Hell and damnation, yes!" old Tom Castille moved his crippled arms irritably. "Take this chair of mine and strap it to a *carreta.* I'm ridin' to San Pedro with yuh. Somebody's got to keep you two from gabbin' in the grog shops!"

"The Three Kings are coming!" That cry traveled San Pedro's single, dusty street with the speed of wind and turned many eyes toward the white road that rolled down from the coastal plain.

Peons, Indios and Californio dons alike watched the procession. A pair of outriders flanked the *carreta* that lurched behind two patient oxen, and those watching recognized the riders as the other two kings of Tres Reyes. Juan Carrillo, his beer-keg bulk flamboyant in sky-blue *calzonera* breeches, and young Bent Castille a bit more soberly garbed in snug gray broadcloth.

There were many who remembered when the old king of Tres Reyes had been as upright in saddle as his son, but that had been in the days when all of them had been young. Tom Castille had come then, a Yankee skipper, and he had all but drowned himself in the brown eyes of Maria del Valle Diego. That he had remained behind had been little wonder. The Californios had approved his purchase of the Rancho Tres Reyes, and they had watched him enlarge his holdings until the rancho stretched from the sea to the crest of the blue Santa Monica Mountains. And to a man they had mourned the passing of Maria del Valle Diego when she had given Tom Castille his only son.

They had watched that son grow into a tall, sunny-haired Californian, and they had accepted him as one of them. There were many who knew the trouble that had come to Tres Reyes. Some had even offered their own gold to a man who had always been ready to aid them, but Tom Castille had shaken his graying head and told them in blunt, Yankee English:

"The Castilles have never accepted favors, and they ain't starting now. Juan's with me, an' Bent. We'll make out."

Juan Carrillo sighed gustily as

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they passed the first of the adobe cantinas lining San Pedro's single waterfront street. "My throat," he groaned, "is drier than the lime our Indios make. Wan glass of *vino*, Señor Tomas, will do no harm. You would like some, too, eh?"

"That I would," the old king of Tres Reyes nodded from his bolted chair which lifted him to a level with the horsemen riding on either side, "but we ain't havin' any. There may be those here as will wonder why the three kings of Tres Reyes are riding into town together. Mebbe I've made a mistake by comin' with you."

"Forget it," Bent said easily, but there was no easiness inside his long body, for he had already spotted the one man he'd hoped not to see.

Shay Peralta was coming from the arched doorway of a cantina not far ahead of them. A small, almost effeminate man, his white hands held a gold-headed cane that was always his constant companion. He leaned on it, looking toward them out of bland, black eyes.

"Señores," he greeted them with a flourishing bow as they drew abreast. "And what brings you to our fair city on this fine day?"

Bent answered the money lender coolly. "I'm taking passage on the *Mary Belle*, and dad and Juan figured I needed seein' off. There's a little señorita in 'Frisco," he lied calmly, "who might get lonesome if I don't get up to see her."

"Perhaps she'll bring you luck." Peralta's thin lips were curling into the caricature of a smile. "It's something you gentlemen need."

The import of his words was plain. Bent felt himself stiffen in his saddle. "You've had your interest on our loan every quarter, Peralta," he said flatly.

The money lender bowed over his cane. "But nothing on the principal, señores," he reminded icily.

"You'll get it," Bent said thickly.

"Way here!" Tom Castille was roaring the words at peons and Indios who were clogging the street, waving greetings at them. "Bent" —his words were soft, and for his son's ears alone—"keep that hot tongue of yours bottled. Peralta's pumping you."

The money lender was turning, and mincing back into the cantina. Bent looked after the man, then turned his eyes to his father. "He'd see me board the *Belle*," he said grimly. "It's better to have told him something."

"There's another watching us, too," Tom Castille's crooked arms gestured cross street, and Bent turned his eyes in that direction.

Cliff Carscadden had come to the open door of the Yankee Tavern there. The Conejo rancher was big enough to just about fill the opening. A full, curly beard, black as his eyes, flowed down across the boiled front of his white shirt. A nugget watch chain was looped across his checkered vest. He stood with his thumbs hooked into its pockets and surveyed the trio passing in the street.

"Gents, howdy," his voice boomed affably through the patter of soft-voiced Californio talk that was filling the street. "Been figuring on riding over the mountains to Tres

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Reyes one of these days, but mebbe seein' we're all here together, we can talk some business now. How about joining me in a noggin of ale?"

"The *Belle*," Bent said, and his lean face remained impassive, "sails with the tide, Carscadden. Save your talk," he was keeping up the deception, "until I bring back a bride from 'Frisco."

"A man without gold in his pocket makes a poor husband, Castille," the Conejo rancher drawled. "Now I might be able to remedy that."

Lean hands folded across the pommel of his saddle, Bent matched the other's insolence. "So?" His sun-faded brows lifted. "And where would you be getting it, Carscadden? Your stock sells here for no more than ours."

Cliff Carscadden chuckled. "There are more ways than one of filling your pockets with gold slugs, Castille. Ever tried your luck in the Bella Union? I'll pay you twenty-five thousand in cold cash for Tres Reyes, lock, stock, and barrel."

Tom Castille spat over the side of the *carreta*. "That," he boomed, "wouldn't even buy the barrel, mister. Good day to you, sir!"

As they reached the beach, Bent saw that the *Mary Belle's* long boat was already drawn up on the curving, white strand, waiting for him. A goodly share of San Pedro's population milled about it. Sailing time always attracted a crowd, for it was something to break the monotony of lazy days.

Tall in his saddle, Bent automatically led the way through the lane that had opened for the *carreta*. His thoughts, though, were back along the street, studying the motives of Carscadden and Peralta, in making their talk today so blunt. It was the first time either of the men had openly admitted a desire to possess the Ranch of the Three Kings. His companions were also silent, and Bent knew they were asking themselves the same question, but there was no chance for private conversation with the crowd pressing so closely about them.

Bent was swinging in his saddle to bid his father good-by when the knife came with all the suddenness of hell fire itself. He heard the faint whisper of it through the air behind his back, and instinct made him duck forward across the high pommel of his saddle as the sudden, wild thought came that here was death!

II

Flying steel prickled Bent's scalp and he felt the gray, flat-crowned Californio hat he was wearing lift from his head. It sailed forward before his eyes, and he caught the unforgettable picture of a bright blade pinning brim to crown.

He heard Juan Carrillo mutter, "*Madre de Dios!*" as he stiffened in his saddle, and whirled the palomino. A trickle of blood was warm against his flat cheek as he got his mount around to face the motley crowd behind them.

Tawny eyes narrowed to slits, Bent searched the throng, but there was no face in which he could read anything but surprise and shock. Not a peon, Indio, Yankee sailor, or plain

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waterfront rat had moved. No one was trying to force his way from the group.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Juan Carrillo had his riata in hand, fingers building a small loop with incredible speed. "Wan of you," he was almost pleading, "wan of you *cabrones* please move and show your guilt. Then you will see how a Californio treats those who play at murder!"

Their Indio muleteer, handling the ox team hitched to the *carreta* had passed in front of his docile team to pick up the hat whipped from the head of his *patron*. Wordlessly, he handed it to the young King of Tres Reyes.

Bent took it, slowly drawing the knife from its crown. The six-inch blade was bright as the sunlight about them. Gold filigree inlaid the black ebony handle. The *cuchillo* was a work of art. Beautifully balanced, it lay in his hand as wickedly dangerous as a baby diamondback. It was the kind of knife that a man would treasure, Bent realized. Not one to be wasted without either hate or greed to make its loss worthwhile. And there wasn't a man in the southland who had any reason to hate a one of the Three Kings of Tres Reyes. Greed then, gold greasing a palm, had made someone in the crowd try to kill him.

But why? Why would anyone wish to prevent him from boarding the *Mary Belle?* It was a question that time might answer, Bent decided grimly, and then the voice of the long boat's coxswain disturbed his thoughts.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," the man had come to the side of the palomino, "but I've just received sign from the deck of the *Belle* ordering you to come aboard if yuh want to sail with us. The tide's running out, and it's time for us to go."

Bent glanced down at the sailor, a wry smile twisting his lips. "You've got it about right at that," he told the man. "I think it *is* time for us to go!"

"But, señor," Juan Carrillo started to expostulate, "we cannot leave thees thing lay as it is. Murder is murder. We must find the *cabron* who tried to keel you."

Blood staining one side of his brown face, Bent glanced at the third king of Tres Reyes, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Save yourself some trouble," he spoke loudly enough for all the silent crowd to hear him. "I'm still here. A gent trying to kill a man doesn't quit because he misses once. Maybe the second time he'll be luckier. And he'd better be, because if he isn't *I'll kill him!*"

The killer was in the crowd. Bent had spoken directly, knowing the man would hear him, and remember his words. It was something that might unsteady the other's hand if he made a second attempt in the future.

Old Tom Castille's face was the gray of granite as Bent swung down from his palomino and reached up to touch his father's crippled hand. "Watch yourself, dad," he murmured softly. "If they want me, they want you and Juan, too."

"If I had legs that would carry

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me and arms that would move," Tom Castille groaned, "I'd take this whole blasted bunch apart."

"You'll have them again, if we're lucky," Bent said huskily. "Meantime," he repeated, "watch yourself."

"I'll do that, you bet," Tom nodded his gray head. "It ain't time for the Three Kings to cash in their chips. Good luck to you, son!"

"*Vaya con Dios, señor,*" Juan Carrillo's moon face was sober. "Go with God!"

Bent boarded the *Mary Belle*, and Captain Ben Steele met him on deck as the schooner heeled into the channel before an off-shore breeze. Steele was a small, broad man, his face deep-lined by the years he'd spent at sea. The captain had been a friend since Bent could remember, for he and his father had sailed the world together, before Tom Castille had quit the sea.

"Hear tell you near got yourself killed this afternoon," Steele greeted the tall young king of Tres Reyes.

Bent pulled the knife that had been aimed at his back from the waistband of his trousers. He'd washed up in his cabin, and the ship's surgeon had disinfected the slight gash the blade had carved at the line of his blond hair. In fresh clothes now, he balanced easily to the sway of the schooner for this was not the first time he'd sailed the Santa Barbara channel with Captain Steele.

"Take a look," he invited. "I'm keepin' this for a souvenir to hand along to my grandchildren."

"If yuh ever live to marry and have any," the captain said soberly. "Mister, why would airy hombre try and kill a Tres Reyes man?"

Bent shrugged, and his own face turned sober. "Ben, I've asked myself that same question. Mebbe I'll find the answer in San Francisco."

"And mebbe you'll find a wooden coffin!" the captain grunted. "Come on along. It's time to eat."

As the days of passage drew on, Bent had time to plan the drive north that the three kings would make once he managed to convince San Francisco buyers that it was feasible to bring Southern California cattle to the northern Golconda. The need of hungry mouths had already stripped the valleys south to San Luis Obispo, he felt certain.

But save for the stock shipped north by coasting schooner, the southland's back log of beef had remained untouched. If they were successful theirs would be the trail-blazing venture, for other *rancheros* would quickly follow them to the new market. A surplus of cattle then would reduce the price, but that was to be expected. However, Tres Reyes could take the reduction along with the rest when that time came, for by then, Bent reflected, their ranch would be clear of debt, and they'd have the gold to bring doctors to fight the disease that had chained his father to a chair.

"All we've got to do," he muttered, looking into the blue ocean distance beyond the lifting prow of the *Mary Belle*, "is make that first drive a whopper. And we've sure got enough cattle in the mountains to do it."

From the bow of the *Mary Belle*, he watched the seven hills of San

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Francisco rise through trailing wisps of fog as the schooner nosed into the bay, heading for the quays that already lined the Embarcadero shore. Here the gold seekers had come in '49 and '50 from over a world gone mad as word of Marshall's strike reached them. France and England and Germany had sent its share of adventurers. South America, China and Mexico had added more thousands. And from all parts of the United States, emigrants were turning their eyes westward, drawn by the lure of El Dorado gold. Yes, this was San Francisco, where the chaff mixed with the wheat, and a man carried the law on his hip.

These, then, were the people who would pay hard-won gold for a taste of Tres Reyes beef.

Bent heard Ben Steele's step on the deck behind him, and he glanced obliquely at the captain as the ship's master came to his side.

"You'll find a bit of everything in that melting pot," Steele gestured at the hodge-podge city rising behind the Embarcadero shore. "Good men, an' bad. But good or bad, they'll all be out to trim a greenhorn from Los Angeles. Watch your talk, and watch your step. I'm hopin' you ain't forgotten that knife."

"I haven't," Bent said dryly, and his face turned bleak. "I'm not forgettin' either that Carscadden and Peralta will cut Tres Reyes like a ripe melon if we're not successful in bringing a trail herd to these shores."

"They're the pair," Ben Steele said grimly, "as were behind that try to kill you."

Bent shook his head slowly. "That's what I keep telling myself," he admitted, "but every time I do I come up against the same wall. There were none but me and dad and Juan within earshot when we talked of driving a herd up here. They're not mind readers, Ben. That blasted Peralta knows we can't pay him off on the proceeds of shiploads like this one. So all he's got to do is sit tight and let interest gobble Tres Reyes. Why should he risk trying to kill me? No, Ben, there was more to that knife try than we can see yet. Maybe I'll find the answer ashore."

"Or a quick grave," Ben Steele

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growled, "for there's one thing certain, amigo. Somebody didn't want you to board the *Belle*. Which means you ain't wanted in San Francisco. So walk light when you hit Portsmouth Square!"

Bent was in Portsmouth Square within the hour, and he had never seen anything that quite equaled it. Saloons, gambling halls, hotels and tinsel palaces rose behind the rough boardwalks. Men of every color and nationality swirled ceaselessly about the Square. Bent saw a huge, red-bearded miner toss a handful of bright silver into the air, and let it fall to the boardwalk. Others kicked it unheeding into the dust of the Square.

"Chicken feed," he heard the miner roar. "Who in hell wants change for a doubloon? Thar's plenty more where it came from. This is my night to howl, an' I aim to do 'er. Any of them as is dry, foller me. The treat's on Red Malone—"

Bent watched the huge Argonaut turn like a blind bull, jostling men out of his path with the swing of a burly arm, and then he was stiffening, eyes widening unbelievingly as he glimpsed a tall, black beaver hat riding atop a narrow head. Garbed in meticulous black, Shay Peralta was easily recognized, even before Malone's swinging arm caught the money lender's stovepipe hat and sent it winging from his head.

A snarl twitched Peralta's lips into the caricature of a smile, and the gold-headed cane he always carried drew back like the head of a diamond-back. Malone had plunged on a pace, booming laughter on his lips. Playful as a giant puppy, he was unaware of the danger behind him. With the deadliness of a bullet at short range, the heavy gold head of that cane would cave the Argonaut's skull at one blow.

"Peralta!" Bent snapped the single word, and his long body had dropped into an unconscious crouch. Right hand poised above one of the twin Dragoons that rode his thighs, he saw the money lender hesitate. "Take your swing," Bent said flatly, "and we'll see how you like the taste of lead!"

III

Peralta's wedge face was fish-belly white. Even his lips, slitted back from stained teeth were colorless. Hatred flamed in his black eyes, and for an instant Bent thought the money lender would still strike the Argonaut.

Then Red Malone was whirling, and taking his own hand in this trouble. Eyes red as his flaming beard, he studied the money lender and the telltale cane.

"Why, you lousy leetle banty," he drawled contemptuously. "Cane me, would you?"

"Kill you!" Bent corrected coldly. "Peralta," he added, "get yourself away from here, and do it quick. You may be top dog in Los Angeles, but you're just another shyster up here."

Shay Peralta's eyes had narrowed to black slits. "This will go down on the debit side of my ledger, Castille!" he said thinly.

Bent watched the money lender

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stoop and pick up his hat. Peralta turned then, cane tucked under his arm, and Bent was forced to admire the man's poise as he stepped through the crowd. But what was Peralta doing here in San Francisco? And how had he arrived so quickly? The second question found an answer in Bent's mind. Fast horses, held in relay along *El Camino Real.* Relays a man couldn't organize as he rode the King's Highway. That meant Peralta had made this ride before. It meant keeping horses all along the five hundred miles of brown road that stretched between here and Los Angeles.

"Which costs him dinero, and plenty of it," Bent muttered under his breath. "And that's not like the cuss at all. He's never spent a dime in his life that ain't made him a dollar!"

Something, then, brought Peralta to San Francisco frequently, and Bent had the premonition that he would have to find the reason before a Tres Reyes trail herd could reach these Yuerba Buena shores.

A Red Malone trouble had sobered loomed before him. Bent was tall, standing better than six feet in his round-toed *botas,* but he looked like a stripling alongside the huge Argonaut.

"Feller," the redhead rumbled, "I dunno your name, but I'd be plumb obleeged to buy you a horn of the best brandy they serve in yonder Welcome House. You saved my bacon, and Red Malone ain't one to forget a favor."

The Welcome House. Bent's eyes passed the Argonaut, and he noticed for the first time the gilt sign arching above the wide doors of a saloon just ahead.

"I'll take you up on that," he said with one of his quick smiles, for he was remembering the advice Captain Ben Steele had given him as he'd dropped into the *Mary Belle's* long boat.

"Make the Welcome House your first stop, son," the captain had said. "It's owned by Big Bill Price. He's the man for you to see. A kind of promoter, I guess you'd call him. He's the city's chief cattle buyer. He owns the biggest lumber yard. A good share of the real estate around Portsmouth Square, and some say the most honkatonks. But he's square. I know, because he's the one who has been takin' your stock from me. He'll know the quality of Reyes beef, and any price he names you for it will be fair. Get his opinion concernin' a drive. It'll be worth your time. And do it quick, son," the captain's weathered face had expressed concern. "I got the feelin' that the sooner you shake the dust of this hell hole off your feet the better for you and Tres Reyes."

With Red Malone beside him, Bent stepped into the Welcome House, curiously surveying his surroundings. Gambling tables and roulette wheels lined one side of the long room. The bar stretched on their right. Glassware sparkled, and overhead crystal chandeliers supported lamps that sent their soft glow about the room. Adventurers from the ends of the earth filled the Welcome House. Paris gowns and white shoulders. Boiled

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shirts and black coats. Miners' rough garb, and Californio gold braid.

"You'll see 'em all here," Red Malone growled. "And there ain't a man or a woman with an empty pocket, Castille. Nor one who ain't ready to pick your own. That's San Francisco for you. When I'm drunk, every man jack is my friend. When I'm sober, there ain't a one I'd trust across the street. Come along, give the barkeep a smile, and name your poison. We'll forget that leetle skunk I swiped accidental-like. You seem to know him." His brown eyes were curious as he regarded the cattleman.

"I do," Bent said quietly, and his own eyes were on a cold-visaged black-mustached man leaning at the opposite corner of the mahogany bar. Something told him he was looking at Big Bill Price, and then Malone's glad whoop corroborated his hunch.

"Bill!" the big redhead yelled. "Damn me, but you're a sight for sore eyes. The Sacramento's all right, but I'll take 'Frisco." He was forging toward the mustached man as he spoke, and Bent followed him. When they came abreast, Malone swung and laid a hand on Bent's arm. "Meet a gent who just saved me a cracked skull. Mister . . ."

"Castille," Bent said quietly, and held out his hand.

Price's thick, dark eyebrows rose, and his sharp black eyes caught every detail of Bent's neat gray clothes, and the pair of Colts that rode his slim thighs.

"Castille?" he murmured. "You're from the south?" His eyes touched Bent's thick, blond hair. "'Friscans," he murmured, "wear hats."

"Mine," Bent said, "got a knife through it in San Pedro. Mebbe," he added coolly, "we could have that drink Malone mentioned in your office."

Price regarded the young king of Tres Reyes silently. "*Bueno,*" he agreed finally. "You've got some cattle to sell?"

"More than you've had before," Bent told the buyer.

Ten minutes later he was explaining his remark. "Price, I want to gather a herd of Tres Reyes stock and make a drive up the coast. A thousand head. Mebbe it's possible, mebbe it ain't."

Big Bill Price had settled himself in a heavy chair behind the flat top desk in his office. He poured drinks from a bottle taken out of a drawer, and a dry smile touched his lips.

"It's quite possible," he murmured, "seeing as Cliff Carscadden has been doin' it for some time!"

"Carscadden?" Bent heard the hoarse word leave his lips, and he could hardly believe that he was speaking. "You mean he's already broken trail for southland herds?"

Price nodded, chill amusement in his eyes.

Bent stood up from the chair the promoter had offered him. His nerves were singing like violin strings as he leaned forward across the San Franciscan's desk, and in his mind's eye was a picture of Cliff Carscadden's holdings across the Santa Monica mountains from Tres Reyes —a postage stamp ranch compared to those owned by native Californios

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in the Conejo Valley. Carscadden had tried to buy land from them, Bent knew, but the old dons had cold-shouldered the newcomer. That was why Carscadden had turned his eyes toward Tres Reyes and the empire along the coast.

Through lips suddenly dry as sand, Bent spoke. "One decent-sized trail herd," he said slowly, "would strip every last head of stock from Carscadden's Linked C."

Price shrugged tailored shoulders. His voice was gentle, and that chill amusement was still in his eyes as he answered the young king of Tres Reyes. "Then his herds must multiply with great rapidity," he drawled, "for he has delivered five thousand cattle to my Yuerba Buena yards across the bay within the last six months. They have fed a lot of mouths. A sirloin steak, Castille, wears no brand!"

Bent swung blindly toward the door.

"Where in tarnation you goin'?" Red Malone had surged to his feet behind the Californian.

"Across the bay to Price's yards," Bent said thickly. "I'll swim, if it comes to that!"

"And I'll paddle right along with you, amigo," the redbeard rumbled. "You ain't gettin' away from me till I buy you that drink!"

"It's almost dark," Price said reasonably. "Morning will suit you as well as now, Castille."

Bent glanced back across his shoulder as he reached the office door, and his eyes were the same tawny hue as the wood beneath his hand. "No," he said harshly. "If there's a Three K steer in your Yuerba Buena yard, a gent named Shay Peralta is going to pay for it!"

"Peralta?" Price drawled. "He's Carscadden's agent. I've dealt with him before. He demands sixty dollars a head in gold, and I've paid it to him. Bring me a prime herd of Tres Reyes beef, Castille, and I'll offer you the same price. 'Friscans are a hungry lot, and there's little beef left between here and San Luis Obispo. I wish you luck, Castille!"

With the Argonaut following him like a huge St. Bernard, Bent pushed through the saloon and into Portsmouth Square. Dusk had fallen here, but looking down across the rag-tag town Bent could see the sparkle of sunlight still on the bay. With luck, and a good long boat crew to bend the oars, they could reach the Yuerba Buena shore before dark, Bent judged. He plunged into the narrow, twisty gut of Market Street, descending to the Embarcadero.

"Keep a sharp eye in your head, mister," Red Malone warned. "There are footpads and pickpockets lurkin' in nigh every alley. They like the cut of a gent like you. Them clothes you're wearin' will spell money to 'em."

Bent laughed harshly. "There's not enough in my belt to put in your eye, Red. And won't be until a thousand head of Tres Reyes cattle land in Price's stockyard."

A thousand head, sixty thousand dollars. It was a sum huge enough to spin a man's head, and the answer, Bent realized, to some of the ques-

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tions that had been puzzling him. A knife aimed at his back, for instance. Carscadden and Peralta had been making their drives quietly through the inland valleys. Easy-going dons from the Conejo to Santa Barbara could be easily deceived by a man likely claiming he'd purchased a Santa Ynez or San Luis Obispo rancho, and was driving cattle north to stock his new range. The thought brought a mirthless smile to his lips. It was simple to see why Peralta and Carscadden had tried to keep a Tres Reyes man from reaching San Francisco.

IV

There were other things also easy to see when they trudged across the sand flats to the level plain beyond the Yuerba Buena landing. The boat crew they'd hired to bring them across the bay was waiting at the quay behind them.

"We'll be ready to sail back within an hour or less," Bent had told them. "There'll be a doubloon to put in your sock when we do."

"Aye aye, sir," the skipper of the small boat had answered. "You ain't the only toff who's required our services this afternoon. A leetle feller carryin' a gold-head cane, and wearin' a black topper sailed with us no more than an hour back."

"Walk light and keep your powder dry, mister," Red Malone had cautioned once they were out of earshot of the crew. "Blast me, I got drunk last night, and mislaid my gun some'eres, but mebbe my fists will be enough to take care of airy trouble if it comes to that."

"There'll be trouble for a gent five hundred miles to the south of us," Bent told the big redhead flatly, "if we find Tres Reyes beef in the yards ahead."

The pungent stench of cattle drew them through the dusk toward a huge, shadowy building and the spider web fretwork of many corrals beyond. The building, Bent guessed, was probably a slaughterhouse and tannery. As they walked closer, he could see that many of the corrals were empty.

"San Francisco," he told his companion grimly, "is going back to a diet of sowbelly and beans if Price doesn't get more cattle in here soon."

There was a light glowing behind a window in one corner of the huge slaughterhouse. Bent headed for it after a moment's hesitation. Hides waiting tanning might tell them more than cattle in the corrals. At the sound of their approach, he saw a door open. A broad, squat man in a leather apron, filthy with dried gore and bits of hair, came to stand in the opening.

"Evenin', men," he greeted them. "What can I do for you?"

Bent regarded the man as they halted at the foot of the steps leading up to the doorway. "Price sent us over to look at some hides he's got for sale," he told the other coolly. "I'm interested in buyin' a load if they're up to par."

He heard an approving grunt from Malone at his shoulder, but he kept his eyes on the man above them. The slaughterhouse keeper pawed at his

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shaggy beard, then a grin parted his lips.

"Wa'al now ye can come in and take a squint for yourselves, if Price sent you over," he agreed. " 'Twould have been better to come by day, howsomever. Yuh can't tell much by lantern light."

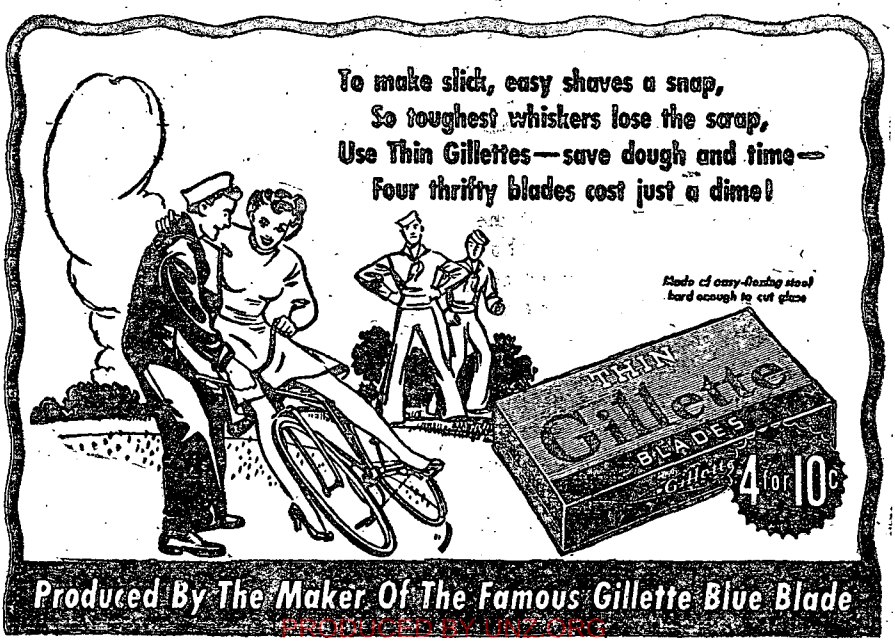
"I'll be able to see enough!" Bent said flatly.

With Malone at his heels, he followed the aproned man into the dusty office. The floor was dirty. Old newspapers and trash littered the rough table that served for a desk, and the stench that came through an opposite, open door was enough to sicken a man.

Bent felt his stomach turn, but he kept his eyes steadily on the slaughterman as the other stepped toward a lantern hooked to the wall beside the inner door. He watched the man's hand reach so eagerly for the lantern that they fumbled a little as he lifted it from its hook. At his shoulder, Malone's breath hissed out like steam from a teakettle, and he knew the big Argonaut had reached the same conclusion that was in his own mind. The keeper was over-eager to show them into the warehouse.

Bent thought of the information the ferryman had inadvertently given them. Shay Peralta had crossed the bay not long ahead of them. "Step right forward, gents." The slaughterhouse keeper turned with a grin. "I'll walk behind and hold the lantern up so you can see yore way."

"No," Bent corrected, and the thinnest of smiles was on his lips,



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"you'll walk *in front* of us, amigo, and show us the way!"

His hands were sweeping back and down toward holstered Colts when the double-click of Dragoons already coming to full cock froze him like the dry rattle of a diamond-back at his heels. They had walked into a trap! The thought flashed through Bent's mind even before words came from the door behind them.

"Leave your guns alone, Señor Castille!" the voice came from the door through which they had entered, and it belonged to Shay Peralta. "This time," the money lender added, "I have the Colts. Señor Varney, step behind the gentlemen and take their weapons."

The slaughterhouse keeper was grinning. "'Walk into my parlor,' said the spider tuh the fly. You gents just ain't smart."

Bent shifted his feet slightly, balancing himself. No change of expression showed the flow of his thoughts. If Varney got his guns, neither he nor Red Malone would ever leave this building alive. Death had stalked him in San Pedro, as it was stalking the two of them now.

"Leave Malone out of this, boys," Bent said a little hoarsely. "It's not his fight." He was gathering his muscles, and he saw his words divert Varney's attention momentarily.

"He's in it right with—" Those were the only words the slaughterhouse keeper got out before Bent's shoulder hit him just above the leather apron. Like a battering ram, the weight of his body drove Varney backward. The man stumbled against the desk, and went down with papers fluttering about him like giant snowflakes.

Still in a half crouch, Bent plunged on forward toward the dark inner door of the slaughterhouse. He heard Malone's hoarse yell of approval, and knew the redhead was right at his heels. A Colt thundered once from the door behind them, and Bent felt the breath of the bullet stir his thick hair. Varney had invited them to step into the warehouse first. Death was likely waiting for them in the darkness ahead, but at least a man might have a fighting chance.

Bent reached for the Colts they'd tried to take from him. Guns flicking from leather, he thumbed two random shots into the darkness ahead, then he was through the doorway, and Shay Peralta's angry voice was crying:

"Follow them, fool! I will have the heart of every man if they escape."

"They won't git far!" Bent heard the man called Varney snarl. "My boys know their business."

Varney's confident words were still ringing in Castille's ears when lead streaked out at them from the shadow of a long table to the right. A stack of hides loomed on the left. Bent was panting a little when he got behind them, and he could hear Malone's breath whistling between his teeth.

"That was nip and tuck, amigo," the redhead whispered huskily. "And now it will be hide-and-go-seek, with the Devil waitin' for them as is caught!"

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Bent pressed one of his Colts into the redhead's hand. "Make the lead count if you use it," he counseled softly. "We'll have no time to reload. There's bound to be doors opening out of this place," he went on with his lips close to the Argonaut's ear. "It's up to us to find one of them."

"They'll nail us sure as shootin' if we don't," Malone agreed. "Two agin' a likely half dozen, they've got the odds all with 'em."

Nodding, Bent turned from the stack of hides where they had been crouching. He could hear the scuff of cautious feet moving through the dark, and the sound gave him a little hope. In the darkness Peralta's men wouldn't know whether they were stalking one of their own members or the prey they had trapped here. It made the darkness a shield for hunted and hunter alike.

Malone touched his arm. "Lead the way, amigo," he invited. "The devil hates a faint heart!"

Eyes growing a little more accustomed to the darkness, Bent angled toward the wall far to their right. If they reached it, finding a door would be their only chance. Moving quietly, he kept his eyes on the wall ahead of them. Like a giant ghost, Malone paced beside him. The wall was close now. Bent reached out and touched rough boards. He swung to the left keeping his fingers lightly against the wood.

A rat scurried away from his feet, and in the silence of the warehouse its claws made a sharp racket. Immediately Varney's voice sang out: "Is that you, Dipp?"

Tongue dry against his lips, Bent answered the hail. "It's me, all right. Damned rats—"

"And yo're a damned liar!" another voice cried from off to the left. Varney, this is me, Dipp, over hyar. Them cusses we're after are ag'in the bay-side wall. Close in and pinch 'em off. We've got 'em between us."

Bent felt a cross bar with a peg driven into it. The bar moved beneath his hand and a crack of pale light showed between tall, double doors. They'd be out of here before Peralta's killers could attack, was the thought in his mind as he pressed against the doors. They moved a little against his hands, and he heard the groan of hinges, but they would not open.

Peralta had missed no bets. He'd seen to it that bars lay across the outside, as well as the inside of all the warehouse doors!

"Let me hit it!" Malone said in a savage whisper. "Gorry, and I ain't a three-hundred pounder for nothin'!"

Before he could reply, Bent saw the redhead back off a pair of paces, then lunge forward. The crash of his shoulder against the doors woke booming echoes in the warehouse.

Lead whipped toward them from the right and left, and from the shadowy stacks of hides directly behind them. The gun flashes looked like fiery eyes in the darkness. They were surrounded on three sides, Bent realized. Crouching, he fired at the gun flash on the right, conscious that now there were only three loads left in his Colt.

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"Hold 'em off, amigo!" Malone panted. "By thunder, we'll make it yet. They—"

Bent heard a surprised breath whip from the redhead's lips, and the lighter shine of the outer night was suddenly all about them. He felt the clean inrush of fog air against his nostrils. Some one had lifted the bar from the outside of the big doors!

"*Madre de Dios!*" Juan Carrillo's querulous voice came through the opening. "Must I come een after you, amigo?"

Bent spun and made a long dive toward the open night.

"Rush them, you cabrones," he heard Peralta's frenzied cry. "Do not let them reach the open—"

Bent swung, and sent two low shots into the slaughterhouse. His other Colt was speaking in Malone's hand, and from inside came a long, agonized cry.

"*'Sta bueno!*" Juan Carrillo chuckled. "Perhaps now they will not be so anxious to walk through thees door."

"It's not the only one that's handy," Bent said through set teeth. "They'll be after us, pronto."

The third king of Tres Reyes chuckled again. "Not unless they have weengs, señor. Look you." His gesture turned Bent's gaze toward the shadowy corrals. "Three *caballos* are there. Saddled and ready to ride. So, let us go . . ."

"But how—" Bent started to express his surprise.

"Señor," Carrillo cut him short, "there will be plenty of time for talk once we are away from here. And I promise you there ees plenty to talk about, and none of it is good!"

Nodding, Bent turned. At a run he led the way toward the three saddled horses, and 'Frisco killers grown courageous again sent lead whipping after them. He heard the ugly impact of a slug striking a corral rail as he reached the saddled horses. Swinging to leather, he found Carrillo and Malone up on either side of him.

"That Peralta," Juan Carrillo's voice was sober, "weel follow us to hell, señor. For the time has come when he dares not let us live."

After the stench of the slaughterhouse, the feel of the cool night air was heady as wine. Bent savored it as their mounts reached the brown ribbon of *El Camino Real*. A mile lay between them and any pursuit now. He drew rein as they reached the road, and glanced obliquely at the third king of Tres Reyes.

"Which way from here, Juan?"

"South, señor," Carrillo answered promptly. "South as the crow flies. Caramba, and I have much to tell you." His brown eyes swung to Malone. "You have nothing to win by riding with us," he added simply. "The mines are north. I would head that way if I were you."

Malone tugged at his beard. "You wouldn't do no such thing," he grunted. "Your pard here saved my bacon when I was startin' on a spree. I owe him a drink which he ain't had time to collect yet—"

"And won't for perhaps some time to come," Carrillo's voice was grim.

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"So you weel ride with us. The good *Dios* knows we can use a third man. Señor," the big Californio turned his attention to Bent as they swung their mounts into the Camino, "I weel start from the time we leave you in San Pedro."

Bent nodded. "Dad?" he questioned.

"He ees the same, but not so Tres Reyes. *Caramba,* but we have been three blind fools. Señor, I crossed the Pass of Santa Ana, from our rancho to the Valley of the Conejo. And all the way through the mountains I see old sign of our cattle, but none that ees fresh. So I ride into the canyons and to the peaks, and I tell you, señor, where our Three K stock was once thick as the fleas on a dog, I find only wild *oreanas* that no man can rope. *Es verdad!* It is no wonder that a knife came at you in San Pedro. The wonder is that our throats have not been slit before this. For while we have cared for your *padre,* and our small herds that feed on the coastal mesas, that *cabron,* Cliff Carscadden and his *renegado* riders have grown fat on our cattle. Tres Reyes ees feenished, señor, unless—"

Bent chuckled, and there was no mirth in the sound. He felt sick inside, like a man taking a blow to the solar plexus. Juan Carrillo was bolstering the knowledge that was already his, but he had not realized that Carscadden and Peralta had done such a systematic job of stripping Tres Reyes.

"Price, in San Francisco," he said grimly, "the same as told me that Carscadden was driving our stock to his Yuerba Buena yards. But I wanted proof. That's how come Malone and I crossed the bay this evening."

"And that ees how come I, too, paused there before hunting passage across the bay," Carrillo explained. "Those corrals they are filled with Three K beef. I was searching them out, when I saw you and Señor Malone enter that slaughterhouse. I also saw that money-lending *cabron,* Shay Peralta follow after you. To save you, señores, I knew we would need *caballos.* I found these in the barn behind the corrals, and that ees what kept me from opening the slaughterhouse doors more queekly."

"You handled it fast enough," the big redhead growled. "What I want to know is what you got up your sleeve now? There ain't no law along El Camino Real exceptin' what a man carries in his holster."

V

"That, señor, I know," Juan Carrillo said flatly. "Eet is why I suggested that perhaps you would not like to ride with us, for I will tell you again we are riding to meet death!"

"And I'm tellin' you again," Red Malone grinned suddenly, "that I ain't pullin' out until I buy Castille that drink. Which means there ain't none of us goin' to do any dyin' for awhile, on account of I don't believe in wastin' good whiskey on dead men. So name your poison, mister!"

"*Nada.*" Juan Carrillo shook his head. "Not poison, señores. Salvation for Tres Reyes! That is what I offer you!"

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"Salvation?" Bent stirred in his saddle.

"That is what I offer," Juan Carrillo repeated.

"Name it," Bent urged, and he felt a sudden excitement moving him as he studied the third king of Tres Reyes. His thoughts were on a crippled king, and on a ranch that would be forfeited to Shay Peralta unless the money they owed him was paid. The money lender's try at killing him did not cancel their debt.

Juan Carrillo drew a deep breath into his broad chest. "Señores," he said quietly, "Carscadden is on his way up the coast with a herd for San Francisco. *Si*, a great herd. If we can take it from him we will save Tres Reyes. If we fail . . ." He shrugged.

The warm air of a second afternoon was in their nostrils as Bent reined a black mount he had borrowed from one of the friendly ranchos in the Salinas Valley to a halt at the crest of the Pass of Santa Margarita, where the Camino crossed the *Sierra del Monte Diablo*.

He savored the air, and glanced at his two companions. The speed of their two-day ride had completely sobered the red-bearded Argonaut. Malone's eyes were as clear now as the bay of San Luis Obispo they could see in the far distance ahead of them. On the other side of him, Juan Carrillo's fat paunch seemed to have shrunk at least an inch.

Bent grinned at the third king of Tres Reyes. "Make another ride like this, Juan," he drawled, "and you won't have any gut left!"

The Californio groaned. "Eet will be my feenish if we do," he said dolefully, and then he was stiffening in his saddle, all fatigue forgotten. Right hand shading his eyes, he stared into the south.

Bent followed the direction of the other's gaze, and he felt his own spine stiffen. The blue of the late afternoon sky in that direction was soiled by a yellow pillar of dust rising lazily above the narrow coastal plain.

"Dios," Carrillo breathed. "They come, señores! Cattle are kicking up that dust. *Tres Reyes cattle!"*

All the long way down the coast, Bent had formulated and discarded one plan after another. Juan Carrillo, he'd grimly decided, had spoken just about the truth when he'd said they were riding to meet death. But now, with his eyes brightening, he studied that distant dust cloud.

"The plain"—he spoke the thoughts coming into his mind—"isn't more than a mile wide where Carscadden will have to bed down tonight. The breeze will be in-shore from the ocean—"

"What has that to do weeth our beef, amigo?" Carrillo asked.

Bent's thick brows lifted. "You ask me that, Juan?" he drawled, and his hands were almost casually drawing flint and steel from the pouch slung at his saddlehorn. "The grass along that strip is thick and dry, amigo. Cattle will run from fire."

"Dios!" Juan Carrillo's approving shout hit the sky. "All thees long ride down the coast, I have tortured my brains to figure some plan for taking our cattle from Carscadden,

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but never did I theenk of anything so seemple. Our own steers will save themselves by trampling that Carscadden and his *renegados* into the dust of the Camino. Señores, let us ride. San Luis vaqueros will be easy to hire once the herd is ours."

"And so we move," Red Malone grinned. "Castille, I'll git to buy you that drink yet!"

Night lay across the narrow coastal plain when Bent signaled his companions to halt on a rock-ribbed rise that overlooked the flats beyond them. A fog breeze howled amongst the boulders bringing with it the muted booming of surf along the rocky coast a half mile or more to their right. Chalk hills loomed on the left. Save for sparse sage, they were devoid of verdure. Fire would not cross them, Bent figured, and stampeding cattle would be moving too rapidly to climb their steep sides. Oaks dotted the dry-grass plain ahead, and beneath a copse a mile or more in front of them, a campfire glowed like a single red eye. Carscadden's camp. On this side of it, against the pale shine of the plain, loomed the dark mass of the bedded trail herd.

"We have been blind fools," Juan Carrillo muttered. "But now—"

"Now," Bent said flatly, "we'll take back a part of what we've lost. Carscadden's done us one favor of sorts. At least he's blazed a trail north that we can follow."

"Eef we are lucky!" murmured Juan.

"We'll make it," Red Malone growled.

Bent had his eyes on the glowing fire beyond the bedded herd. "We've got to wait here," he said softly, "until their fire dies down. When it does and they're asleep, we'll light our own—"

"Not tonight, señores!" the voice mingled with the brisk sea breeze whipping in off the ocean, and for the space of a second Bent was hardly sure that he heard it. Then his eyes found the length of a black beaver hat rising above one of the boulders that flanked the Camino on their left. Shay Peralta's narrow face was a pale blur beneath the hat brim.

"Tonight," he said, "you are dead men! No, do not reach for weapons. There are cocked guns looking at you. Your friends along the Camino who gave you mounts haven't the horseflesh my corrals afford. So, we arrive ahead of you. I knew you would be foolhardy enough, Castille, to attempt to take over our trail herd. Consequently, we prepare this little surprise for you. The cattle they will stampede, and after they pass this way, travelers along the Camino in the morning will find three dead men and three dead horses. You will not be the first who have fallen in the path of a running herd."

"Blood on the Camino . . ." Bent murmured, and he was thinking that any plan could work two ways. Then out of the corner of his eyes he saw Juan Carrillo's nimble fingers lift plaited leather from the pommel of his saddle. The Californio's riata circled his head once with lazy speed, then whipped out sidewise like the head of a darting snake.

"Fire!" Peralta's screamed order

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mingled with the crying wind, then his body was rising from behind the boulder like an animated scarecrow, as red gun flame gashed the night. Bent felt the sting of a bullet furrow his thigh as his spurs raked backward. He saw the giant redhead sway alongside him, and he thought for an instant that the Irishman was going to fall, then the Argonaut's bull voice shouted defiance.

"Shoot, you spalpeens. It'll take more than renegade lead to knock out a Malone!"

Bent swept over the ridge and he found no pity in his heart for the jouncing burden trailing behind Carrillo's running mount. There'd be many men in California able to breathe easier once the word spread that the Los Angeles money lender was dead.

Behind them, he heard a voice cry thinly, "They got the chief, and we got our dinero. There'll be no more comin' from Peralta—"

Bent smiled thinly as he heard the cry. Scum, recruited from the dives and taverns of San Luis Obispo, had little stomach for honest fighting once the cards were falling against them.

Ahead, a dark mass startled by gunfire was moving against the pale shine of the plain.

"Keep 'em rollin'." Bent's savage shout carried to Carrillo and Malone. "We won't need fire!"

Shadows were darting about the red eye of the camp coals on the farther side of the stirring herd. Bent had no pity for them. A wild vaquero yell left his lips. Colt in hand, he fired directly into the faces of cattle rearing to their feet. Malone and Carrillo were spreading out on either side of him to do the same, and it was more than even tired steers could stand. Like a sluggish giant, the herd was turning, starting to move. A brown tide in the night, Bent saw the cattle surge back the way they had come. The fire beneath the oaks winked out, and Bent knew that renegades caught afoot would have no chance to escape the cloven-footed death thundering down on them.

They were beneath the trees themselves then, and Bent reined down, conscious suddenly of the blood that stained his thigh. It was nothing, though, that a San Luis medico couldn't patch before they headed Tres Reyes beef north to a market that would load their pockets with gold to buy old Tom Castille release from pain and worry.

"It's over, amigos," he said quietly.

"Not quite, it ain't!" The hoarse words came from the crooked limbs of a tall oak arching over them. "Cliff Carscadden ain't goin' to hell

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without company, Castille!"

Bent's head and Colt were snapping up at the same time. Like a cougar crouched to spring, he spotted the Conejo rancher clinging to a big limb. Flame from their guns seemed to clash in mid-air as both of them fired. Bent felt the force of a slug smash him back in his saddle, and then Carscadden's body was tumbling downward. The man struck with a sodden impact, and Bent knew that the last enemy of Tres Reyes was dead.

Juan Carrillo was echoing his thought. "He ees gone, señor. Dead. Dying, perhaps, so that the Three Kings may live."

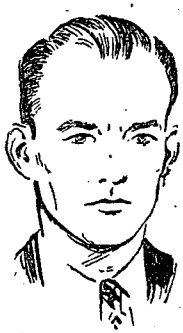
Red Malone's rusty chuckle came to Bent. "And now, mebbe, I'll be able to buy you that drink, Castille. We'll need it after a San Luis sawbones gits through with us."

Bent smiled against the pain that was moving through him. "For once," he told the Argonaut, "I'll agree with you."

"And so when we get the chance," Juan Carrillo grinned, "Señor Malone will have to buy three drinks instead of two, for thees time I will drink with you, and we will drink to the Three Kings of Tres Reyes. *Es verdad!*"

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Giff Cheshire

belongs to the third generation of his family who have lived in Oregon. One of his grandfathers came there with the great wagon trains and another, after spending years in the ore beds of Nevada and California, made Oregon his home at the turn of the century. So it's only natural that this young writer, whose stories are steadily mounting in popularity, should be instilled with the spirit of the pioneers.

"I grew up," Giff tells us, "on a ranch pierced by the old stagecoach trail from Portland to San Francisco. The family garden site was an old Indian midden and cultivation never failed to turn up a pestle, mortar, pot or arrowhead. After finishing school, I joined the U. S. Navy just in time to be detached and assigned to the U. S. Marines when they were dispatched to Central America, where I spent two years with the leathernecks chasing bandits and dodging ambushes. I eventually wound up with the Army Engineers and have been with them ever since."

Cheshire now lives in the suburbs of Portland with his wife and two children. "Although I had tried writing stories from time to time," he says, "it was during a long convalescence from a recent illness that I began writing in earnest. Once started it seems to be a trail from which there is no turning . . ."

Proof that this promising author is well on his way toward blazing a significant and colorful trail in fiction is shown in JOHNNYS CRENSHAW'S WEDDING CAKE which appears in our next issue, along with your favorites, Walt Coburn, Seth Ranger, William Heuman, C. K. Shaw, L. P. Holmes and many others.

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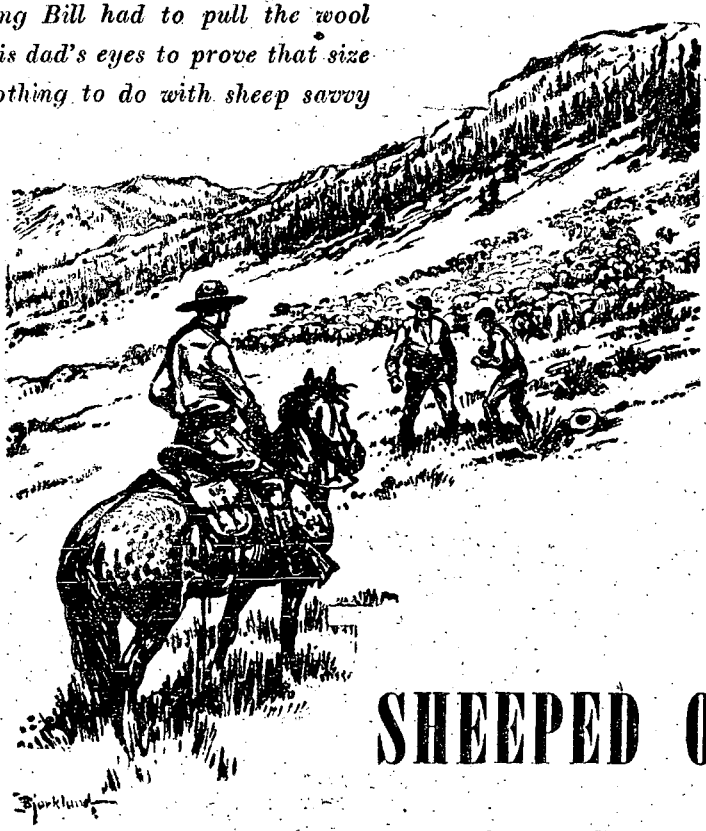
Floating Bill had to pull the wool over his dad's eyes to prove that size has nothing to do with sheep savvy



SHEEPED OUT

by RAY PALMER TRACY

FLOATING BILL O'TOOLE—called *Floating* because some range wag claimed his sailing gait was due to the runt wearing his suspenders so tight he couldn't get his heels to the ground—picked up the lead rope of his string of pack horses and stepped up in his saddle. There was a cocky grin on his small face and something resembling a strut in the way he rode.

His band of two thousand sheep, his two dogs and his lanky, red-whiskered herder, Pete Cummings, were kegged up under the eastern Oregon pines for the noon-day rest. Floating Bill skirted around them and angled up a timbered ridge. A mile to the southwest lay his new forest service reserve allotment, on Squaw Creek.

On top of the ridge, Floating Bill stopped and listened. Off to the east he could hear dogs. The bark-

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ing located one of Champ O'Toole's dozen bands of sheep, also on their way to a new high pasture allotment.

Floating Bill chuckled. He was willing to bet a pretty his father was fit to be tied. The old man had delegated a band of tough wethers, with his craftiest herder and camp tender, to wreck Floating Bill's delicate band of ewes and lambs on the long trail from the lowlands. But the effort had failed.

Instead of being pushed to the ragged edge of bankruptcy, Floating Bill had outmaneuvered his father. He had arrived in the mountains with sheep whose wool glowed with that pearly gray which denotes health and condition.

Although Floating Bill's size was not the chief cause of the struggle between him and his father, it laid the foundation. It had started when Floating Bill was fourteen and his father came to the reluctant conclusion that the boy was not destined to grow into a two-hundred-pound, heavy-fisted descendant of the Black Irish like himself. To a man who took pride in the fear inspired by his bull roar and the swagger of his huge shoulders, it was a shameful thing to have sired such a runty offspring.

However, Floating Bill's stature did not interfere with his father's ambitious plans for him. Ignoring the fact that from the time he could toddle, Floating Bill had been crazy about sheep, Champ let him in on the good news that he was earmarked for the law.

"Lawyers," he explained, "become politicians. Politicians run the country. With the O'Toole money and influence behind you, you'll go far."

"I ain't going to be no lawyer," Floating Bill promptly declined the honor. "I'm going to be a sheepman."

Opposition always enraged Champ. "Don't you give me no back talk!" he roared. "I've planned for you to become a lawyer since the day you was born! It's settled!"

"I'm going to be a sheepman," repeated Floating Bill stubbornly.

The argument got under way in the tool shed. Growing in violence, it circled the barn and wound up in the corral. There, his son's stubbornness got too much for Champ and he countered with his muscles. The larruping Floating Bill got even topped the one he drew when he was bunch-herding and went to sleep and let his bunches mix. As on that occasion, his father failed to wring as much as a grunt out of him.

"Now I reckon you'll do as you're told without no more nonsense!" thundered Champ when he had thrashed the boy until he had worn the edge off his anger and was beginning to be ashamed of himself. "With that uncivil tongue you've got swiveled in your face, you're bound to be a top lawyer!"

Floating Bill unclenched his teeth. "I'm going to be a sheepman!" he said.

The unreasonableness of him detonated Champ again. "Either you become a lawyer or you get off this ranch!" he bellowed.

"I'll get off the ranch," Floating Bill made his choice. "And if I ever come back you'll send for me."

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"When I send for you," promised Champ out of his rage and hurt, "I'll make you a full partner, retire and let you run the outfit!" Blindly he stumbled out of the corral.

Floating Bill gathered his possessions and left. An experienced sheephand, even at his early age, he had no difficulty in getting herding and camp-tending jobs during the following years.

He celebrated his coming of age by filing on a homestead. The piece of government land he picked out was one which his father had had under fence so long everyone thought it belonged to him.

The shack Floating Bill built could be viewed from Champ's front window. He threw up a fence which cut his father's best hay meadow squarely across the center. Moving in the six hundred old canners in which he had invested his savings, he made himself at home.

Champ r'ared up and down over what he called a scurvy trick. But Floating Bill only grinned and said he had picked this spot so he could be near his mother.

Outside of mayhem and arson, Champ and a sharp lawyer tried every trick they could devise to oust the interloper from the middle of the ranch. Floating Bill foiled every effort. He had now been there three years and the struggle was still going on.

With one more victory under his belt, Floating Bill left the top of the ridge and rode down through the timber to the first big meadow on Squaw Creek. As he broke into the open, he pulled up sharply.

In front of him, headed east and flung in a wide feeding spread, was a big band of sheep. Just back of the drag he recognized Tod Slattery, one of Champ O'Toole's herders. And there was Champ himself leading his horse. He had just joined Tod and the two of them were starting to drive the band toward Champ's own allotment.

Floating Bill had expected the forest ranger of the new service to be on hand to check each outfit onto its proper reserve. He was unprepared for this. While he was being harried and delayed on the trail, his father had rushed a big band ahead to clean out the cream of the feed on his allotment.

The roar of anger that burst out of Floating Bill only lacked volume to match his father's best. He dropped the lead rope and drummed his heels against the sides of his mount. When he reached Champ, he jumped to the ground and ran up to him as though he intended to tear him asunder.

"What you herding them old cripples of yours on my grass for?" he yelled.

"Your grass, Willie?" Champ raised shaggy brows in vast surprise. "Ain't this government land like that hundred and sixty you filed on in my hay field?"

Floating Bill choked back a blistering retort. After all, Champ was his father.

"I've got a government permit for this reserve and you know it," he said.

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"Is anyone supposed to pay attention to them things?" inquired Champ wonderingly.

Floating Bill's temper slipped. "You know you've got no business here, you old grass thief!" he accused.

"What! You calling me a thief!" Champ was stunned.

"If you ain't, you'll do till one comes along!" confirmed Floating Bill recklessly.

A lot of times in the past three years Champ had longed to cuff Floating Bill. But Mrs. O'Toole had kept her eye on him. This seemed a heaven-sent opportunity. Champ reached out a big paw and fetched Floating Bill a contemptuous, open-handed clout that knocked him winding.

"Maybe that will learn you to use a little respect toward your father!" he rebuked.

Floating Bill was too mad to act by anything save instinct. He rose off the ground. Head, hands and feet bunched, he hit his father in the midriff.

The breath went out of Champ in a mighty whoosh. Furious, he made a frantic grab at his slightly built son. But Floating Bill had evolved a technique when he had fought bigger boys at school. It now served him well. He clung to his father like a blackberry bush to a silk veil.

Champ could neither push him away nor lay him down. And he couldn't land an effective blow on a man practically buried in his shirt front. On the other hand it did not seem to hamper Floating Bill. The bruising quality of his punches surprised and worried his father.

The noise and violence of the battle was at its peak when the forest ranger rode into the meadow.

The ranger, a tall, intelligent young graduate of the new forestry course at Yale, knew all about trees and the theory of forest supervision. However, the only practical experience he had was what he had gained during a couple of vacations up in Maine.

But though he lacked experience and complete understanding, he had plenty of will to make up for it. Neither was he short on personal courage. He rode right into the thick of the engagement.

"Stop that fighting!" he ordered in a tone of authority.

Floating Bill let go his hold and leaped back out of his father's reach.

Champ glared at the ranger. "This," he roared, "is a private fight!"

"Guess again. No fight in my district is private," came the cold answer. "I'm Lem Bartlett, the government forest ranger."

The blue of Floating Bill's eyes glittered. "I'm Bill O'Toole, and that trespasser over there is Champ O'Toole," he introduced himself and his father. "If you're the ranger, I want to know what you mean by letting my father sheep the grass off my allotment before I could get to it."

Lem had already heard about the O'Tooles. It made him cautious.

"Those your sheep?" he asked Champ.

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"Sure they're my sheep."

"What they doing on Bill O'Toole's allotment?"

"My herder got mixed up," explained Champ. "I just now found him and was moving him where he belongs when Willie jumped me. Ain't that so, Tod?"

The herder who had hurried over to enjoy the fight, nodded. "Lew Furnass, our foreman, said this was O'Toole ground. I thought he meant Champ O'Toole," he backed up his boss with a suspicion of rehearsed glibness.

"Well, get your sheep back to your own allotment."

"Of course," agreed Champ. "Go ahead, Tod."

"Wait a minute," put in Floating Bill. "Where do I get more grass to make up for what this old pirate stole?"

"I'll take it up with the supervisor," promised Bartlett. "If it can be proved it was willful trespass, Champ O'Toole will get fined."

"Fined! What good will that do me?" demanded Floating Bill. "What I need is grass."

"It'll grow again by next year," taunted Champ.

"You better help your herder get your sheep off this allotment," advised Bartlett meaningly.

Champ took the hint, but there was a triumphant swagger to his shoulders as he walked away.

"So this is how the new forest service business works," accused Floating Bill bitterly. "The ranger lets anyone who feels like it sheep off your allotment. When you ask for more grass to make up the loss, you get told that maybe the fella who sheeped you out will be fined."

"I'll take it up with the supervisor," promised Bartlett again.

"Yeah, and that's the last I'll hear of it this year."

Bartlett looked away. He knew what Floating Bill said would probably prove true. "I'll do the best I can for you," he said and left.

Floating Bill watched the trespassing band disappear to the east and then mounted his horse. He rode around the meadow and ran an expert eye over the grass.

It was worse than he had thought. His father's band had been in the meadow a long time. But proving it to be willful trespass would be next to impossible.

This meadow alone was not all that was worrying Floating Bill. His father might have brought five or six bands on ahead. Bill's whole allotment might be pretty well picked over. He was almost afraid to go and look. Anyhow, he didn't have time tonight.

He picked up his pack horses and took them to a dry knoll under a grove of pines where he planned to make his first camp. It was a camp he had used before. So had many others. There was a low pole fence around the place to keep horses and cows out of the camp in the days when this had been free range—for those who could hold it.

By the time Pete Cummings showed up in the meadow with his sheep, Floating Bill had camp established, the horses hobbled and grazing and supper ready.

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When Pete had the sheep bedded down and came in to eat, Floating Bill told him what had happened, and what he feared.

"Why, the doggoned old sooner!" exploded Pete who was from Oklahoma. "What we going to do for grass?"

"Looks like we was up Salt Creek without a paddle," Floating Bill admitted.

Pete scratched his flaming beard and eyed his runty boss shrewdly. When Floating Bill appeared to be meekly bowing to disaster, something was cooking. Pete went to sleep in a contented frame of mind.

The next morning Floating Bill saddled his horse and rode up the creek. The creek valley narrowed until he was riding up something resembling a miniature canyon. He passed through a belt of timber and then the slopes spread to permit another meadow.

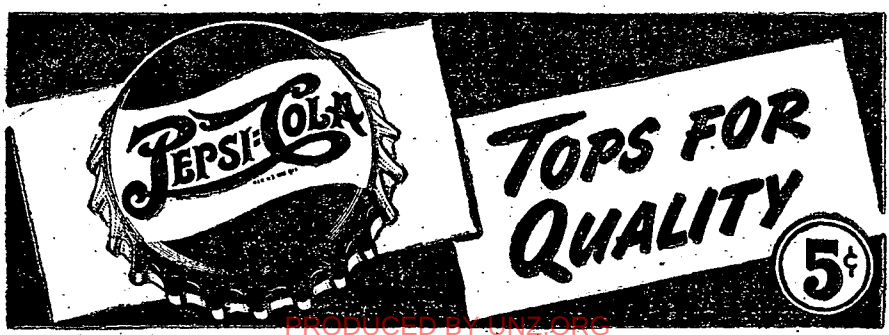
Floating Bill nodded. He had run into sheep sign all the way and it had been as he had expected. The cream of the grass in this meadow had also been sheeped out.

He circled the wide slopes of the grass-floored forest to a big bench and inspected a mountain prairie. From there, he visited all the best pasture spots. Sheep had been everywhere. With the overworked ranger pinned down at the other end of his district, Champ had been able to move in half his outfit and get all but one band out again unobserved.

Floating Bill sat on his horse at the south end of his allotment and thought it over. He dismissed waiting for the forest service to act in his behalf as too dangerous a policy. If he was going to move anything other than a band of skeletons home, he had to do something about it himself.

Until the forest service had taken over, this allotment as well as the huge one his father had, had been across the deadline the cattlemen had drawn against sheep. The sheepmen had never respected that line and bitter range wars were fought because of it.

Floating Bill hadn't been playing hide-and-go-seek with angry cowmen in this territory for the past ten years without learning every hidden route.



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Due to the terrain, his Squaw Creek allotment was long and narrow, almost as long as that of Champ's. Between the two was a low mountain spur rimmed with bluffs on both sides. It made a natural barrier, excepting at the north end where the spur broke off abruptly.

There was supposed to be no way over the bluffs, but Floating Bill had discovered one, or rather, an old outlaw sheep had discovered it for him. One day he saw her standing on top of the bluffs.

Investigation of a little box canyon revealed an old game trail that sheep could get up quite easily. Horses, however, had to go south into the heart of the cow territory and wade the swift water of the creek where it had carved a canyon through the spur.

Floating Bill had used the game trail in the range war days. It now offered a possible solution to his present predicament. For it gave him access to the south end of his father's allotment.

If he could get his sheep over there and keep from being discovered, he could even the score with Champ. At the same time it would give him the necessary feed to carry his band through the summer.

To reach the allotment, Floating Bill not only had to follow the top of the spur deep into cow territory, but in swinging back, he had to pass dangerously close to a cowman's headquarters. Still he had gotten away with it before. Maybe he could do it again.

The first thing Champ and Lew would do would be to ride around the entire Champ O'Toole allotment, sizing up the feed. Then they would divide the range between the different bands. The south end was high. The grass would stay lush there the longest. So the first camps would be established at the north end. Floating Bill gave them time to get settled while he completed his own plans.

On the fourth day Floating Bill's camp looked as usual. Pete was out with the sheep, part of the spread being in the meadow. Anyone looking at it would have said the rest of the sheep were in the brush and timber on the slope. That there was only one dog in sight meant nothing, as a rule. In this case, the other dog was helping Floating Bill put half the band on top of the spur by way of the old game trail.

The noise of an ewe and lamb band on the move is comparable to that of a boiler factory. On that account, Floating Bill had to time his speed of travel carefully along the top of the spur to the broken rims near the creek canyon, where he could get the band down the other side.

A bright, full moon hung in a midnight sky when he eased the noisy band down around a point to a shale bench where he knew they would leave no tracks. The strong night wind whipped the sound of the operation away from the set of cattle ranch buildings in the bottom land below.

Slowly the band rattled and blatted along the bench, moved beyond the buildings. Then the wind died for a minute. It picked up again, but

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the damage was done. The dogs at the ranch heard the row. A pair came charging up to the bench.

Floating Bill went to meet them. With well-aimed rocks and commanding curses, he kept them at a distance. Discouraged, they turned back. Apparently they had not been heard for no one came to investigate.

Before daybreak, Bill bedded the sheep across the line on the south end of his father's allotment. A few hours' rest and the band was on the move again, reveling in grass back high.

Floating Bill's dog, Tucker, was a big mongrel with a touch of mastiff in his blood. He was a skilled sheep worker, capable and willing to mix with any pair of coyotes who tried to gang up on him—something the coyotes seemed to sense for most of them kept their distance.

Leaving the band in Tucker's charge, Floating Bill scouted out the locations of Champ's different bands and where their next camp sites would be. It was not guess work with him. He knew where he would place each band. Lew Furnass, a good sheepman, could be counted on to pick the same spots.

Floating Bill returned to his own sheep and herded them accordingly. He didn't try to be economical, but skimmed the cream of the feed as he moved from pasture to pasture. Each night he spread his blankets in a new place and his fires were built of the dryest of sticks. Both he and Tucker lived out of the pack on his back.

His greatest problem was to get the supplies for himself and Tucker and the weekly salt for the sheep from the top of the bluff at the head of the game trail where Pete cached them for him. It kept him busy nights. He grew gaunt and thin under the strain and sleeplessness. But the sheep were rolling up fat.

In his second week, Bill saw Lem Bartlett, the forest ranger, ride across the south end of the range and disappear in cow territory. Floating Bill didn't see how he could avoid noticing the sheep sign. For a minute he thought of pulling out. Then it occurred to him that the ranger would think the sign came from Champ's own sheep and was unlikely to mention it. So he stayed on. Nothing happened and he went safely into his second month.

One of Champ's bands made an unexpected move and camped just across a narrow canyon from where Floating Bill was ranging. He promptly muzzled Tucker and worked his sheep out of sight and hearing. He figured that even if the herder had caught a glimpse of the sheep he would think they were from another band of his own outfit. The danger lay in the possibility that he might mention it to Lew and start an investigation.

By the end of the second month, three of Champ's bands were dangerously close. It was time to get out, but the moon was not right and Floating Bill hung on.

It was at the beginning of the ninth week that the string played out. Right at sunset, with the sheep bedded down not far from the dividing spur, Champ and his foreman

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rode into the meadow just to the east. They were puzzled by the sheep sign.

Floating Bill grabbed Tucker to keep him from barking. It looked to be a useless effort as the pair rode slowly toward the spot where the sheep were bedded. Although the bed ground was out of sight, all that was needed was for one old ewe to decide she wanted her lamb, or a lamb to conclude he was hungry. Then everything would be in the open.

But the sheep were full, comfortable and contented. For a wonder they kept their mouths shut. Before Champ and Lew were close enough to see them, they stopped. Champ said: "This is some of Jim Burley's work, sneaking ahead of the others." Burley was a camptender given to such tricks.

"Burley's band is too far east of here," Lew objected.

"He's the only one who could get here first," insisted Champ. "We'll go talk to him."

Champ and his foreman turned back. They were still unsuspicious that any sheep but their own were on the allotment. But Floating Bill knew his time had run out. That night, once again lighted by the moon, he shoved his band back over the shale bench above the cattle ranch, this time without arousing the dogs.

He camped on top of the spur, and at daybreak pushed the band on. Late in the afternoon, he got the last of the sheep down the old game trail to Squaw Meadows and joined the two halves of his outfit.

Pete's end of the band had done well on the feed Champ had left and there was still enough left to see the whole band through.

"I'm glad it's over," admitted Pete. "I've been expecting something to pop all summer. Every few days some of Champ's outfit snooped around here, counting the horses and making sure the sheep stayed put. There was always a chance they'd discover half the outfit was gone. Like you told me, I got hold of Jack Stall—sent word by the ranger that I wanted to see him. Jack come and done the packing. All I told him was that you was away on business with the forest officials."

"I was, too," grinned Floating Bill. "And I bet you my business picks up on account of it, quick as my father talks to Burley."

The next morning Floating Bill had caught up the horses and was about to start for town to lay in more supplies when Champ and Lem Bartlett came riding into camp.

"So there you are at last!" roared Champ. "I was wondering where you was all summer! Now I know! What you mean by sheepin' off the hull south end of my allotment?"

"Some one sheeped off the back of your allotment?" Floating Bill's surprise was such a work of art it convinced Lem Bartlett and even made Champ hesitate.

Champ quickly recovered. "Don't you deny it!" he blustered. "You was the one who done it!"

"Why come over and tell me?" inquired Floating Bill. "If I done it, it ain't no news. If I didn't, I ain't interested nohow."

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"He's guilty, all right," Champ turned to the ranger. "What you going to do about it?"

"Nothing till I have some proof," answered Bartlett. "In the first place he couldn't get his sheep over there unless they can fly. You know yourself we couldn't find a track leading into the south end of your allotment. If there was a trespasser, how did he get in and out?"

"Did you look for tracks of his own sheep?" suggested Floating Bill helpfully.

Bartlett remembered how Champ had come in on Floating Bill's allotment at the beginning of the season and didn't have much confidence in him. "I've been thinking of that," he said.

Champ purpled. "Look at the condition of his sheep!" he roared. "They're rolling in fat. How'd he do it after—" He broke off.

"After what?" inquired the ranger.

"Nawthing!" Champ answered, almost strangling with wrath. He was certain Floating Bill had trespassed on him in some uncanny way, but to give his reasons would incriminate himself.

Bartlett waited a minute. Then he said: "When you get some real proof as to who sheeped you out—if anyone did—let me know. And don't start any more fights or I'll throw you in jail!" He turned his horse and rode off.

"Maybe cows wandered over the line from the cow reserve," Floating Bill goaded his father, "or do you know cow sign from sheep sign?"

Champ did not seem to hear the insult. The red had faded from his face and neck. He was looking at his son with a curious expression.

"How'd you do it?" he asked in such a mild tone Floating Bill jumped.

"A good sheepman knows how to keep his sheep in condition," Floating Bill answered blandly.

"That's right," agreed Champ so affably Floating Bill was filled with suspicion. "I'll have to admit that you turned out to be a good, two-fisted, slugging sheepman, after all." He dropped his voice confidentially. "You know I was supposed to put only twenty thousand sheep on my allotment. I had four thousand more, so I fetched 'em along. Seemed as though I could pick up enough extra grass to carry a few more. Looks like I slipped up there."

"Maybe Bartlett would be interested in knowing about them extra four thousand." Floating Bill was uneasy. It wasn't like Champ to beckon to disaster in this manner.

"I've got another month to hold twenty-four thousand sheep on a twenty-thousand sheep allotment with the south end pretty well sheeped out—by cows, maybe," Champ went on.

"I ain't worrying," commented Floating Bill.

"You will in a minute," predicted his father. "Remember the brush we had ten years ago down in the corral?"

"Ain't nothing happened to make me forget it—not so far."

"If you recall, you said you'd come home when I sent for you. I also promised that when that day came, I'd make you a full partner,

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retire and let you run the sheep business. Bill, my son, that day has arrived."

"What you mean?" demanded Floating Bill suspiciously.

"I mean it's up to you to handle our sheep from here out. I'll ride over and tell Lew to report to you for orders. Then I'm going home. And remember, like you said, a good sheepman knows how to keep his sheep fat. G'bye, son." Champ wheeled his horse and rode over the hill.

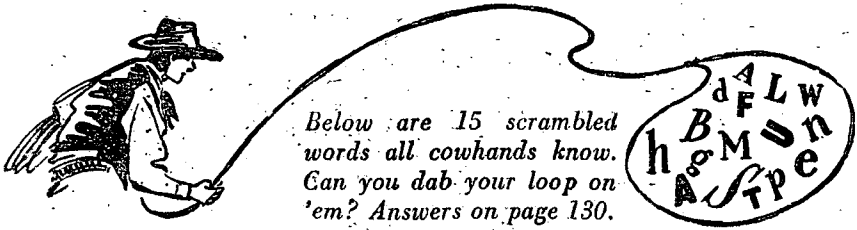
Floating Bill watched him ride away with speechless anger. He had backed his father into a corner only to have him wriggle out and dump the whole mess in his own lap. He glanced upward seeking an inspiration. His gaze remained on the sky, studying the weather.

It had been clouding up for the past few days, threatening to end the long dry spell. A distinct feel of rain was in the air. Rain would bring up the grass on the home trail as well as on the allotments. If he started three or four bands home early—if they were the first on the trail—they could take their time and do very well. The grass on the allotments would handle the others. All ought to arrive home in good condition. The easy solution of the problem calmed Floating Bill.

It was strange that an old sheepman like Champ should overlook anything so obvious. Floating Bill wanted to laugh. Then a suspicion laid hold of him. Rapidly it developed into a certainty. A funny feeling crept into his stomach. His eyes smarted. "Why, the doggoned old faker did see it," he murmured. "He knew the answer when he came over here."

Floating Bill picked up the lead rope of his pack string, stepped up in the saddle and headed for town and a load of supplies. Once again there was a cocky grin on his small face and a hint of a strut in the way he rode his horse.

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.

1. Tricgrade
2. Narelstaket
3. Warts
4. Paders
5. Thich
6. Strede
7. Wedrop
8. Crouppine
9. Hurbs
10. Rearkam
11. Dedlas
12. Bool
13. Right
14. Reefed
15. Trafer

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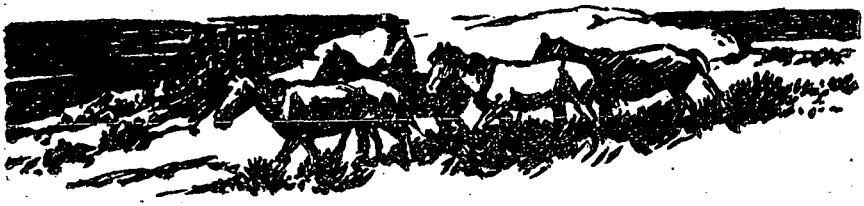

TOUCH SYSTEM

by S. OMAR BARKER

You've heard of this "touch system" by which modern office clerks
Can operate typewriters without lookin' at the works.
It's marvelous the skill they've got upon them word machines—
But doin' things by finger feel ain't new by any means.

You take the old-time cowboy: he could saddle up an' such
The darkest night that ever was, an' do it *all* by touch!
In fact, for doin' touchy jobs without no look nor lamp,
The puncher purt near seems to be the world's unrivaled champ.
He rolls out in the morning while it's still as black as pitch,
An' among two dozen hosses he can tell you which is which.
A herd stampedes at midnight, or a bronco comes undone—
Without no light to see by, he can handle either one.
A busted stirrup leather or a hoss' tangled rope—
He fixes both by feelin', an' he ain't no hand to grope.
He shoes a hoss by starlight an' he rarely bends a nail;
He milks a cow at 4 A.M. an' squirts right in the pail!

A-ridin' through the timber on a starless night an' dark,
He figgers out directions just by feelin' of the bark
Or maybe of the branches of some hilltop spruce or pine,
An' sometimes he will even feel the ground for cattle sign.
He learns his hoss to mind him by the touch of heel or knee—
"Touch system" to the cowboy ain't no new-found novelty;
Because the hours of labor for a man that's workin' stock
Ain't limited by daylight nor the hands upon a clock.
He learns to do in darkness, an' to mostly do 'em right,
A heap of jobs that others could not do in broad daylight.

You set an ol' cowpuncher down to them there word machines,
An' you will think his finger sense just ain't no good for beans;
But in his cow-work ridin' he don't have to strike no match
To find out where it itches—nor to show him where to scratch!

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OUTCASTS OF RIATA RANGE

I

JIM TEMPLETON brought no quarrel to Riata town. When the five o'clock stage fetched him in, he unloaded with a suitcase and a trunk and a vast new tolerance that wiped away the bitterness of the yesterdays. Or so he thought. He took a stand on the boardwalk; a high, broad-shouldered young man in laced boots and corduroy breeches and jacket, and he tilted his flat-brimmed Stetson against the sun and had his look around.

His first reflection was that Riata was a town touched lightly by the years. The huddled false fronts

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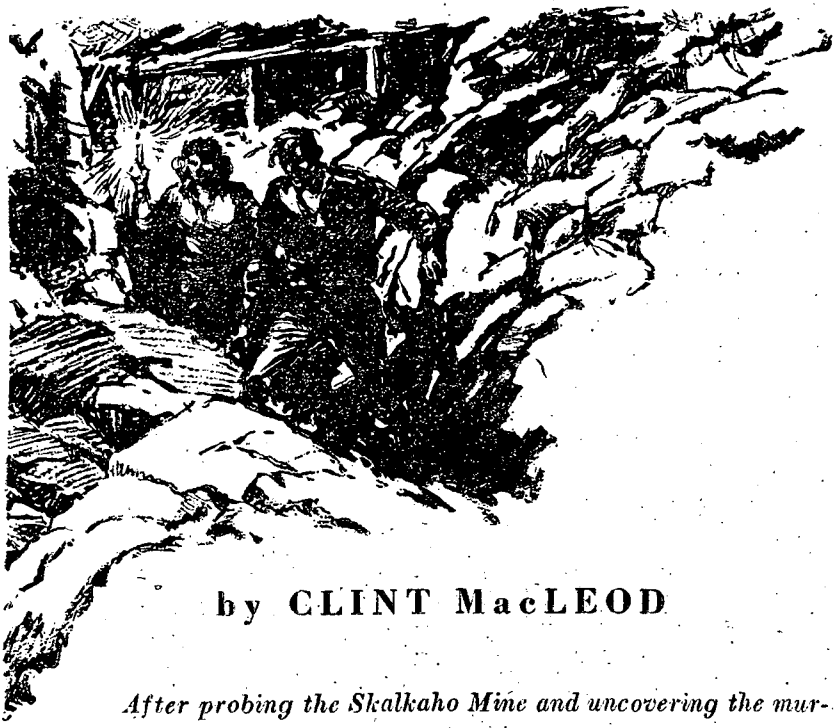

by CLINT MacLEOD

After probing the Skalkaho Mine and uncovering the murder mystery sealed in its depths, Jim Templeton knew why he had been welcomed home with blistering gunfire!

were the same, and the frowning Flintheart Hills made an old and familiar backdrop, and all this was as it had always been. He was home, and there was peace in his heart and a job to be done.

Home. . . . He knew that pool room yonder, and the restaurant that flanked it, and the half-dozen other establishments that made up this segment of the main street. The bank had had its front freshly painted, but Jim's eyes went to the building unerringly, and he found himself frowning. Then he banished the frown with a force of will.

That millinery store across the way was new, he decided. Yet the girl who stood in its doorway was vaguely familiar. She had cool blue eyes and an air of competence, and he racked his memory for a name to fasten upon her. Failing to find it, he thought to cross the street and introduce himself. He had known an outcast's lot in Riata, but that was through and done with, and he itched to shake a friendly hand to make his homecoming complete. And then the kid came barging out

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of the restaurant across the way, and everything was changed for Jim Templeton.

The kid was about twelve, Jim judged, a ragged, undersized urchin who needed a haircut. He came zigzagging across the street like a rabbit flushed from the sagebrush, and hard at his heels lumbered a hulking man with a sheriff's star flashing brightly on his calfskin vest. The lawman's fingers were clutching at the kid's bannering shirt tail when the youngster reached Jim. And with no conscious prompting thought, Jim thrust out a boot that tripped the sheriff and brought him down hard upon the boardwalk.

The kid would have seized that opportunity to get himself elsewhere in a high hurry, but Jim got a grip on the boy's ragged collar, and he said: "Just a minute, son. Whatever is wrong here can be made right." And to the sheriff, who was angrily picking himself up: "You've got quite an edge on this button in size, Rogan. What's the rumpus?"

Sherm Rogan's hand started to where his gun rode. But there was a shoulder holster under Jim's corduroy jacket and the bulge was plain to see, and the sheriff decided abruptly to adopt truculence as a weapon.

"I could jail you for this, stranger!" he said. Then he took a second look at Jim and his jaw sagged, and his speech choked him. "It's Bailey Templeton's kid come back!" he ejaculated. "It's Jim Templeton!"

A crowd was gathering, and in that crowd was the girl from the millinery store; she'd come across the street at the first sign of trouble.

"Yes, Rogan, it's me," Jim said. "And I'm full grown. You could bully me when I was six, and you could threaten me with arrest when I was sixteen, but I'm twenty-four now, and I'll take no lip from you. What have you got against this kid?"

"He just tried to steal a five dollar gold piece from me."

"I didn't!" the kid shrilled from where he cowered behind Jim's long legs. "He put the money down to pay for his eats, and it fell off the counter. I snatched it up, figgerin' to hand it back to him, and he lit out after me."

Jim had his first real look at this kid's pinched face, and he understood then why the boy had been hanging around the restaurant, understood all too well, for once he'd been this boy, underfed and underprivileged and fair target for anybody's boot. Fishing a five dollar gold piece from his pocket, Jim flung it at Sherm Rogan.

"There's your money," he said. "What the kid's got is his own now, and you can find somebody else to bedevil. Satisfied?"

"Maybe," Rogan snapped. "It's about what I could expect from you, Templeton. The son of a thief siding a thief."

Jim's fist balled, but he kept a tight hold on his temper. "It's your gray hair, Rogan, not your badge, that's stopping me from changing the shape of your face," he said. "Just remember that!"

"I could jail you," Rogan re-

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minded him. "But I won't bother. But you'd better make your stay here short, Templeton. You did us a kindness eight years ago by clearing out of here. You'll find no welcome in Riata."

He turned then and strode away, and Jim found that the kid had whisked out of sight. The crowd was dispersing, and the girl was making her way back to her shop. It came to him quite suddenly then that her name was Laverne—Laverne Howie. He'd known her well when she'd been all freckles and arms and legs; and her father, old Seton Howie, had owned a king-sized spread in those days. He called her name, softly and urgently, but she did not look back.

Shrugging, Jim stood indecisively on the edge of the boardwalk, his anger against Sherm Rogan slowly ebbing, and in its place the old bitterness came crowding. Then, leaving his suitcase and trunk in the shadow of the stage depot, he crossed the street to the bank and strode through its open door.

The interior of the bank, too, had been repainted since he'd seen it last, and there were more cages than he remembered. But one door was still where it had always stood, though it bore a different legend now. It said:

CALEB GOODNIGHT, PRESIDENT,

and Jim drummed his knuckles upon it, then forced his way inward to face the tall, lanky man in rusty black who sat behind an unlittered expanse of desk.

"I'm Jim Templeton," he said with unusual curtness.

Caleb Goodnight came to a stand, and Jim was surprised to note that now his own height matched the tall bank president's. Goodnight had a long face, made longer by the sideburns he wore, and though that face was usually schooled to a poker player's immobility, now it was twisted by a great astonishment.

"Great Scott, man," Goodnight said. "I thought I was seeing a ghost! Put a black suit on you and stretch that heavy watch chain your father always wore across the vest, and you'd be Bailey Templeton all over again!"

"The sheriff noticed the resemblance, too," Jim told him. "Can I sit and talk? Or is there no welcome for me here, either?"

Goodnight extended his hand. "Of course you're welcome, boy!" he said. "What have you been doing these last eight years? Heard tell, somewhere, that you're working for Mountain-Pacific Railroad. What brings you home—business or pleasure?"

Jim took the proffered hand, and thus an old desire was fulfilled, but there was something lacking in this consummation, something blasted beyond recall by that incident on the street.

"Business or pleasure?" Jim repeated. "I'd planned it to be both. But Riata feels otherwise. Tell me, Goodnight; how many years will it take for this town to quit hating the name of Templeton?"

Waving Jim to a chair, Goodnight shrugged. "You've got to remember what Bailey Templeton did to Riata, son," the banker said. "Now don't

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go getting your hackles up! Eighteen years ago I was your father's head cashier, and I was probably also his best friend. I liked Bailey Templeton, Jim. He was easy-going, and he was slipshod in his business methods, but he had a way about him. And nobody was sorrier than I when he rode away one night, eighteen years ago, and never showed back. He left a set of ledgers in perfect order, Jim, but the cash was short by a small fortune. It meant the closing of the bank, and it meant ruin for every man on Riata range who'd trusted Bailey."

"But that was no doing of mine!" protested Jim.

"'The sins of the fathers . . .'" Goodnight quoted softly. "Take Seton Howie, for instance. He had all his reserves in this bank, and when your father absconded, it meant ruin for old Seton. He's dead now, and his girl sold the ranch for what she could get, squared up the debts and had just enough left over to buy a millinery store here. You might say she had to suffer because her father pinned his faith in the wrong man. And you had to suffer because you were that man's son. Er . . . by the way, have you ever heard from your father?"

Jim shook his head, and Goodnight said: "I've never told anybody this, but I had a postcard from Bailey several years ago. He was heading for South America, he said. Asked me to try to forgive him, and he also asked me, for old time's sake, to look out for you. But you'd skipped out of town not long before."

"I was sixteen," Jim said. "I'd gotten tired of going without grub, and dodging Sherm Rogan's kicks and cuffs. I lit out and got me a job with Mountain-Pacific. Camp boy for one of the railroad's surveying crews. A year later I was wearing a flagman's red shirt. At eighteen I was handling a transit. Now I'm chief surveyor for the road."

"And that's what brought you here?"

"It's no secret that the M.P. plans on building a spur across Riata range and through the Flintheart Hills," Jim said. "With mining activity booming beyond the hills, that spur will do a good business. And it happens to be my big chance, Goodnight. The chief construction engineer just about fell out of his chair when I handed him a map of Riata range with the right of way all planned out for him. That meant a considerable saving of valuable time; he didn't know this was my old stamping grounds. But a tunnel's got to be put through the Flinthearts. I'm up here to find the best place for that tunnel, and to find it quick."

"I'm proud of you, Jim," Goodnight said. "This town should be, too. You've come a high, handsome way with all the cards stacked against you at the start. I'd like to help you, boy—that is, as much as I dare." His hand flung outward in a sweeping gesture. "I've built this bank on the ruins of what your father left behind. You can understand that I wouldn't dare be openly friendly to the son of Bailey Templeton. But perhaps behind the scenes—"

"I know," Jim said somberly.

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"You've given me your hand, and that's more than I'll get from others in this town. I'm thanking you, Goodnight, but I'll manage alone. I've an ace up my sleeve that will mean another big surprise for my construction engineer."

"A secret?"

"Not at all. Remember the old Skalkaho Mine, Goodnight—the shaft that was dug by a syndicate of Easterners who thought there was gold on this side of the Flinthearts? They abandoned that shaft years back, when they found how wrong they were, and I used to ride out there to play when I was a kid. Laverne Howie tomboyed around with me in those days. The inside of that shaft will tell me a lot, mister. One look in there and I'll know what sort of rock formation to expect in this section of the hills, and I'll be able to make a quick report on the advisability of tunneling hereabouts."

It came to him then that Caleb Goodnight was listening with an intensity beyond any casual interest, and he also saw that the immobility of the man was badly shaken.

"I'm afraid I've bad news for you, Jim," Goodnight said. "That old shaft was covered by a landslide years ago."

"Oh, I know that," Jim said. "The slide buried the opening before I left here. But it will be easier to dig into that old tunnel than to sink experimental shafts someplace else. I've come equipped."

Goodnight rose from his chair again, his face as graven as before. "I wish you luck, Jim," he said. "Even though that will have to be off the record. Come in and see me again, when you can."

Thus abruptly was their interview ended, and Jim took the offered hand once again and went outside. He had found one man in Riata who made a show of friendliness, yet he derived little satisfaction from the memory of his talk with Goodnight. One friend wasn't enough. Some nameless instinct whispered that he was to find big trouble on Riata range. Some inner voice suggested caution and a wariness to his step from here on out.

II

The trouble began shaping itself within the hour. Jim went first to the stage depot, and here he arranged to leave his trunk and suitcase until such time as he wished these articles. He had no intention of getting a hotel room; he burned with a fever of impatience to be out to the Skalkaho Mine, but he had to make certain arrangements first. He needed a saddle horse, for instance, and possibly a pack animal, so he headed for the livery stable to do business.

The hostler proved to be a man remembered from other days; he'd let a younger Jim Templeton sleep in his haymow in the past, but there was no welcome in him now. When Jim spoke his needs, the hostler shook his head.

"Nary a jughead I could rent you tonight," he said shortly. "They're all spoke for."

"Tomorrow, then?"

The hostler shrugged evasively,

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and Jim added: "I'll pay a bonus."

"No hosses for rent," the hostler said in a tone of finality and turned away.

Outside again, Jim marched to the mercantile store. Here, too, he found a man remembered from the yesterdays; time had thinned the storekeeper's hair and dusted it with silver, but there was no recognition in the man's watery eyes. "I've got quite a list of supplies," Jim said. "I'll need the grub for packing, once I get me a horse. Can you put it up for me pronto?"

"Store's closed for the day," the storekeeper said. "You just happened to catch me with the door still open."

Two or three others stood in the store, one a townswoman with a marketing basket under her arm, and the presence of these people gave the lie to the storekeeper's statement. Jim understood then, but he kept his voice even as he said: "Are you trying to tell me my money's no good here?"

"Put 'er that way if you want!" the storekeeper snapped. "I've nothing to sell—to you."

Angrily Jim stalked from the store, but out upon the boardwalk at this golden hour when afternoon began turning itself into evening, he faced a truth that added up to failure. One man might have blacklisted him of his own volition; two men turning him down indicated a plan calculated to force him out of Riata. While he'd talked to Goodnight and afterwards tarried in the stage depot, someone had spread the word that a sullen shoulder was to be turned to the needs of Jim Templeton. And that man who'd given the order was obviously Sheriff Sherm Rogan.

That was the size of it, and there was very little Jim could do to change things. True, he might go to Caleb Goodnight again; his father's erstwhile cashier had made a show of friendliness, but to trade upon that friendliness would be to jeopardize Goodnight's standing in the town, so Jim dismissed the idea. Yet without a horse to carry certain equipment now stowed in his trunk, and without grub to sustain him while he reopened Skalkaho Mine, he would have to forget his plan.

So thinking, Jim walked along, his aimless footsteps bringing him to that same restaurant from which the nameless urchin had fled so frantically not long before. The greasy smell of frying food acutely reminded Jim of his own hunger, and he turned inside and perched himself upon a counter stool and said, "Ham and eggs," to a swarthy man with a chef's apron.

Silently the fellow pointed to a sign which read:

WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE PATRONAGE IF NECESSARY.

Jim Templeton's anger bubbled over then, and he said thickly, "The devil with you and your greasy, stinking joint!" Reaching, he got a hold on the man's hair, and he bumped his forehead hard against the counter by a quick jerk. Releasing the man, he cuffed him with the back of his hand and went out of the restaurant before his wrath grew greater.

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Behind him he could hear the cook howling, and he drew some satisfaction from the thought that at long last he had struck back at the hatred and intolerance of this town. But he knew now that his money was good in Riata for one thing only—a stage ticket. He was going to have to leave or starve, and leaving meant the end of a dream. True, he could come back with an M.P. surveying crew and supplies in plenty, but that would take time, and time was mighty precious to the railroad on this job. And thus he plumbed the depths of bitterness, for he'd planned well but his plan had crashed about him.

That was when the ragged urchin he'd befriended appeared out of nowhere to tug at his sleeve. "I heard what you just told the cook," the kid said. "If you're hungry, I've got some grub for us."

Looking down upon the boy, Jim felt a sudden ticklishness in his throat; he had found almost every hand against him in Riata, but here was one extended in unquestioning friendship. Gravely he said: "I'd be pleased to eat with you."

"I bought grub with the money you got for me," the kid said. "It's down at the shack."

"Got an extra bunk, son?"

The kid nodded, and Jim said: "Just a minute till I get my fixings from the depot. Maybe this town hasn't licked me yet!"

The trunk redeemed from the stage depot, he hoisted it on his back with an effort, and the kid took the suitcase, and thus the two of them trudged along, these outcasts of Riata range who had found a common kinship. The trail took them out of town, down into the willows fringing brawling Riata Creek, and to a one-room shack, decrepit and barren with the blight of poverty.

There was a table inside this shack, and a rickety cooking range, some backless chairs and a couple of bunks. The kid dusted the table clean with his shirt tail, stirred up a fire in the range and went about frying spuds with an efficiency denoting long practice. Watching him, Jim asked: "What's your name, son?"

"Billy. Billy Blue."

That had a familiar ring, but it took some cogitating to place it. "You must be the kid of old Josh Blue who used to be janitor at the bank years back. Your dad dead, Billy?"

The kid shrugged with no great show of feeling. "He's gone some place," he said. "Been gone three weeks this time. I never knew he worked at the bank! Long as I can remember, he's always stayed home and kept drunk. Sometime he lights out, but he always comes home."

A full picture of this boy's father was returning to Jim; he remembered that the bottle had long been Josh Blue's downfall. He asked, "How do you make out on your lonesome, Billy?" But he knew full well how the boy made out; he had snatched scraps from the restaurant himself, and worn the discarded clothes of other boys.

Billy Blue shrugged again. "The sheriff figgers I should be in an orphan asylum, old Josh not being of much account. But some folks are

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kindly. Miss Laverne now, she brings me grub. Did you see how quick she come across the street when the sheriff was after me?"

"Yes," Jim said.

Shortly they sat down to their meal, Billy fishing a candle out of somewhere and plugging it into a long-empty whiskey bottle. They ate, and they had just finished washing the tin plates when there was a light footstep beyond the doorway. Jim started uneasily; that sense of wariness he'd first experienced in the bank had grown upon him, but it was Laverne Howie who framed herself in the doorway. Looking from the boy to the man, she said: "You here?"

"Yes," he said. "Is that so wrong?"

She held silent for a moment, and that gave him time for the incongrous thought that candlelight made her radiant. "Would you step outside?" she asked then. "I'd like to speak to you."

Turning to Billy in the manner of a guest to his host, Jim said gravely: "If you'll excuse me . . ." He followed Laverne Howie through the doorway and to the edge of the creek in the gathering darkness, and here she faced him. She wanted certain words, and they were hard to find; he could see that. At last she said, "I must apologize. I recognized you, of course, when you brushed with Sherm Rogan. I even heard you call my name afterwards, but I didn't turn back. No Howie has reason to be fond of a Templeton. But that's being cruel and unfair. I'm sorry."

"Yes?" he said.

"But it's Billy I want to speak about. It's plain he's given you a place to stay, a kindness in return for your championing him today. Let it end, Jim. Rogan's passed the word around Riata to freeze you out, and it isn't going to be easier for Billy when it gets known that you're sharing his shack. Old Josh Blue's not liked in the town, and that's turned people against Billy too—"

"'The sins of the fathers . . .' Jim said bitterly. "I've already heard that quoted once today. But thanks for speaking. I hadn't thought about what this might do to Billy. Sherm Rogan is taking enough spite out on the kid, as it is."

"Sherm's a hard man, Jim, but he's only doing his duty as he sees it. He's not persecuting Billy. He truly believes that Billy would be better off in an asylum, everything considered."

"What about old Josh?" asked Jim. "Has the bottle thrown him."

"That isn't all," Laverne said. "I wish I knew the whole truth. Josh doesn't work, but he apparently has enough money to keep himself constantly drunk. Quite often he disappears for a week or so. I've tried to look out for Billy, and I took it upon myself to investigate those trips of Josh's. He heads for Butte, Jim, and spends days at gambling. When he goes broke, which he always does, he comes back to Riata. I've told nobody this. There's something queer about Josh's mysterious source

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of money. Things are bad enough for Billy now. They might be worse if it were proved that his father is mixed in something crooked."

"Billy will never have to worry again, Jim told her. "I'm leaving Riata, Laverne, and the kid goes with me."

Her eyes widened. "You're going to be a father to him?"

"I came here with no quarrel," he said. "I came home, willing to forget and forgive. But I came to see another kid being hounded by Sherm Rogan and the rest of the town—hounded, I learn, because of his father's ways. Don't you see, Laverne, Billy is *me*—the Jim Templeton who left Riata and tried to come back. And Billy offered me friendship and food when others were afraid to serve me because of Sherm Rogan. I'm working for Mountain-Pacific Railroad now. Maybe they'll dismiss me for failing here, but whatever the future holds for me, Billy Blue shares it!"

It took her a long time to speak. Then: "You don't know how happy this makes me," she said. "Nor how humble, considering my attitude this afternoon. When you leave Riata, I want you to know you leave one friend behind you, Jim. I'm sorry that you've failed to do whatever it is you came to do. If I could make that different, I would."

"Then make it different!" he cried. "All I need is a horse and some grub."

Laverne's eyes lighted. "I've got a horse—a saddler I kept when I sold our ranch after dad died. And I can get you grub, too!"

He found himself telling her everything then, of his job and his plan and how it depended upon reopening the old Skalkaho Mine. He spoke of the equipment he'd fetched and how he needed a horse to transport that equipment to the mine, and she listened in silent enthusiasm and then made her departure to fetch the horse she promised. Jim stood watching, long after the shadows had swallowed her, a new strength surging through him. With friends like Billy Blue and Laverne Howie to back him, the game wasn't yet lost!

III

The first moonlight found Jim Templeton picking out the trail to the Skalkaho aboard a borrowed horse, a bulky pack tied behind the saddle. Laverne had suggested a night of rest and an early start next morning, but the old fever of impatience was in him again. He could do little work tonight, but at least he'd cover the miles to his destination and be ready for the job. The trail sloped upward, and he had an eye peeled for long-remembered landmarks, and he was almost to the shadow of timber when the rifle bullet whined past his ear, the gun's report dim with distance.

Tumbling down out of his saddle, an act that was pure instinct, Jim had his .45 in his hand as he flattened himself upon the ground. And here he waited, anger urging him to action, logic cautioning him to patience. The minutes dragged, five and ten and twenty of them, but the would-be bushwhacker put in no

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appearance. At last Jim came cautiously to his feet and mounted again.

No use looking for the bushwhacker. Obviously the fellow had faded away once it had seemed that Jim had been shot from his saddle. But the memory of that shot was not easily dismissed. He'd met hatred in Riata, but it had been an impassive hatred with no real teeth in it. This was different. Whether that bullet had been intended in warning, or whether it had been meant to kill him mattered little. They were using guns against him now.

Into the timber's black shadows, he felt more secure, but he kept acutely alert. An owl slid overhead on silent wings, a mountain stream made fretful music in the distance, but there was no alien sight, no menacing sound. An hour passed, and another, and still he climbed steadily, and no second attack came. And then, when the moon stood at its highest, he reached the Skalkaho.

Jim had played here as a child, and therefore he looked upon this mine with a certain nostalgia, seeing the dump heap and the rotted tool shack and other structures and the rusty iron ore cars, long abandoned and forgotten. The shaft had run straight in under the slope, a full sixty feet as he remembered it, but the opening was choked with rocks. He'd remembered that, too, and he was prepared to remove those rocks. But a man needed light for the chore, so he moved off a distance, hobbled his horse and bedded himself upon the saddle blanket.

Up before dawn, he made a cold breakfast from food Laverne had given him, then went to work at once.

Fishing a hatchet from the pack he'd fetched, Jim used it to fell small trees and trim them, lashing three to form a tripod which he placed over the heaped rocks choking the tunnel entrance. A pulley block and tackle, toted in his trunk to Riata and thence to here, was put into place, and with this improvised device he began hoisting away the larger boulders.

It was hard work, and before noon his shirt was glued to him with sweat. But he'd studied the situation with an eye trained by his eight years with Mountain-Pacific, and he saw that certain key rocks blocked the passage. His noon-hour meal was brief, for his enthusiasm took the edge from his appetite, and by mid-afternoon he was toiling on hands and knees, dragging out smaller rocks and scooping away gravel with a shovel.

Forgotten now was everything but the job. Riata was a million miles away, and even Laverne and Billy Blue were dismissed from his memory. He was within inches of his goal; he could feel it in his bones, and finally he'd forced an opening into the shaft and was toiling to enlarge it. He heard the clip-clop of hoofs against the rocky trail without the sound actually registering, and he was recalled to reality only by a sudden remembrance of that would-be bushwhacker. Hastily he backed out of the hole of his own making and came to a stand with his .45 held level. And he found himself looking into the cool blue eyes of Laverne Howie who sat a horse with Billy Blue perched behind her.

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"Oh, hello," Jim said. "You gave me a start!"

"I've brought more food," Laverne said as she dismounted. "Rented this horse at the livery by claiming my own cayuse had gone lame. How's the job?"

"I've made an opening," Jim answered. "Soon I'll have it big enough."

Billy Blue stared at the surroundings with a boy's fascinated interest. "Reckon I could help?" he asked.

"Yes," Jim said, suddenly inspired. "I reckon you could. You're just about the right size to go through the hole I've made. Maybe I won't have to enlarge it."

"Do you think it's safe?" Laverne asked anxiously.

"Absolutely!" Jim strode to his heaped supplies. Selecting a small handpick and a candle from the gear, he said; "Now, Billy, what I want is a few rock samples. You see, the railroad is going to build a tunnel through these hills, and I've a hunch this is the place for it. I'll know for sure when you fetch me the samples. Go as far as the old shaft leads, then start using the pick. Got that straight?"

Billy nodded and began clambering up the heaped rocks. It took some wriggling to get him through the opening, and Jim, waiting just outside, could hear him climbing over the heaped debris inside. "I'm into the shaft," Billy called hollowly. "I'll light the candle now."

"Watch your step!" Jim cautioned him. "There may be loose rock strewing the floor. Take your time."

Silence. Heavy, oppressive silence, now unbroken even by the padding of Billy's feet. Then a scream, wrung out of mortal terror, and Jim barked frantic questions. But it was a long moment before an answer came.

"*There's a skeleton down here!*" Billy's voice was half a sob. "A skull and bones!"

"Easy now, son!" Jim urged in a voice not quite his own. "A skeleton can't hurt you! Any idea whose it might be? Take a look around."

Another silence, more oppressive than the last, and then Jim could hear the kid clambering over the heaped debris again, working toward the opening. Reaching, Jim got a hold on Billy and dragged the boy outside. The youngster had discarded the candle and held instead a gold watch and chain, green and begrimed.

"Found this," Billy said in a shaken voice.

Jim Templeton took the watch, his jaw going grim and tight, and he stood staring at the timepiece for a long while. Then he said: "Last night you tried to tell me, Laverne, that Sherm Rogan is a man who does duty as he sees it. We're going to have to hope that that's true. Last night a man tried to shoot me to keep me from coming here, and tonight we've found the Skalkaho's secret. Billy, you pile on Miss Howie's horse and head for town. Get the sheriff and fetch him here!"

"Sure," said Billy and his hasty departure made evidence of his deep desire to put this mine behind him. Laverne, studying Jim with rapt in-

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tensity, said: "You've recognized that watch, Jim. I can see it in your face."

"My father's," he said and fell frantically to clearing rocks away. Laverne stooped and began helping him, asking no questions.

The night was coming on fast, but still they worked. They used the tripod, and they used their hands, and at last the opening was much larger. "I think I could worm inside," Laverne announced, and before he could stop her, she was making the try. As she vanished from view, Jim began following her. It was a tight squeeze, and he had to unlatch his shoulder belt and leave holster and gun behind him.

When he came clawing down the inner slope of heaped rock, he found Laverne groping for the candle Billy Blue had dropped. She got it aglow, and when they saw the skeleton with the moldy wisps of cloth clinging to it, her free hand closed over Jim's then.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be," he countered. "I thought him gone out of my life and worse than dead. But all these years he's been here. That old rock slide didn't just happen, Laverne. I'm convinced of that now. Dad was brought here and the Skalkaho was blasted shut."

Excitement edged Laverne's voice. "I understand!" she cried. "He never absconded with the bank's money, after all! He was murdered and left here, and Riata jumped to the wrong conclusion when he disappeared and a large sum of money vanished at the same time. No wonder somebody was guarding the trail to Skalkaho last night with a gun! Who did this thing, Jim?"

He shrugged. "I can only guess," he said. "But it looks like it was old Josh Blue."

"Josh! That fits, too! He quit the bank shortly after your dad disappeared, and since then he's had a limitless supply of money, even though he's never worked. And he's been careful to go out of Riata to do his heaviest spending—over the gambling tables at Butte. He must have come back last night. And he must have heard you were in Riata and got worried when he found you taking the trail to Skalkaho. They say a guilty conscience is its own accuser—"

Her voice trailed away, then rose again, swept upward by a new thought. "Billy's dad! And you had all those plans for Billy! What of that, Jim?"

"I don't know," he said dully. "Things have come so fast I can't even think straight. I liked that kid, Laverne. I liked him from the minute he came running out of the restaurant. I liked him because he was another outcast, another boy like I'd been. I'd looked forward to taking him away, doing things for him. But now it's different. Whenever I look at him I'll be remembering that his father killed mine. And I'll be remembering that a Blue put a curse on the name of Templeton and built a hate that still shadows me."

"I suppose all that's true and there's no changing it," Laverne said slowly. "You'll want to see Josh

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Blue hung for this, and I don't blame you. But I'm sorry for Billy—and for you."

He'd fallen silent, wondering at the workings of a destiny that had cleared the Templeton name, but in such a manner as this. He'd taken to Billy Blue, but now there was a wedge driven deep between them, and the thought of it was a bitter one. But: "I'm beginning to understand why Riata's people hated the sight of Bailey Templeton's son," he said. "And I've hated them for their intolerance. Yet I'm no stronger than they. Already I've started holding it against Billy for what *his* father did. To blazes with that, Laverne! Billy's going to need a real father more than ever now. And I'm going to be that father!"

"Jim!" she cried happily.

He was trying to remember what Caleb Goodnight had said about the sins of the fathers. *Goodnight!* One thought had led to another, and now a new excitement gripped Jim.

"We've reasoned wrong, Laverne!" he shouted. "Listen! I don't know where Josh Blue's been getting his money, but it isn't the money that my father was blamed for stealing. Because it wasn't Blue who killed dad. It was Caleb Goodnight!"

Breathlessly, she said: "You're sure?"

"Goodnight claimed he got a postcard from my father saying dad was South America bound. That had slipped my mind. But Goodnight was lying, because my father couldn't possibly have sent a postcard. And what made Goodnight sure that his lie was safe? And what made him look like he'd been knifed when I mentioned opening the Skalkaho? Outside of you, he's the only person in Riata who knew I intended heading here. And that makes him the man who was lying in wait for me on the trail!"

"Listen!" Laverne said suddenly. "Somebody's moving on the rock pile outside. Billy must be back with the sheriff!"

"No!" Jim's voice was sharp. "There hasn't been time enough. Not by a couple of hours." His hand went to his shoulder, for he'd guessed who moved outside, but even as he reached he remembered that he'd left his gun beyond the opening.

IV

Instantly Jim went climbing up over the rocks that still choked the tunnel's end, but before he reached the opening a gun spat outside, the lead whining past his cheek, and it was warning enough. Dropping out of the line of fire, Jim called softly: "Goodnight?"

"So you've guessed that it's me!" the banker's voice came from beyond the opening. "Then you've guessed a number of things, Templeton. I advise you to stay where you are. Try crawling through the hole, and shooting you will be as easy as shooting a gopher."

Laverne had crept beside Jim; her breath caught sharply, and she whispered: "What's he going to do?"

"I don't know," Jim replied, low-voiced. "But whatever it is, let's hope that it takes him time—time

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enough for Billy to be back here with Rogan."

Caleb Goodnight, fumbling around outside, couldn't have heard them, but he must have guessed the trend of their thoughts.

"I met your messenger rabbiting along the trail," he said. "Not suspecting, the kid poured out the whole story when I asked him a few questions. I was afraid of that watch, Templeton. A lot of people might remember it as being Bailey Templeton's. But there was no way of stripping Templeton of identification eighteen years ago. Luring him into the tunnel so I could blow it shut behind him was hard enough. You're wondering how I did that? I told Bailey that some men were interested in buying the Skalkaho and wanted to borrow money from the bank to finance operations. Your father was gullible enough to come out here with me to look over the mine as possible security. While he was exploring the shaft, I set off a keg of blasting powder I'd hidden close by. No one ever suspected that it was anything but a landslide that closed the shaft."

All this Jim heard, but it was not the story of Bailey Templeton's betrayal that put the anger in his voice. "The kid?" he choked. "If you've killed him, Goodnight—"

"He's still alive," Goodnight cut in. "He's very wiry for such an undersized youngster, and I had to use my gun barrel to subdue him. He's stretched out unconscious not ten feet from where I'm standing."

Jim said: "When I get my hands on you, you scheming devil—"

"Ah, but you won't," Goodnight taunted him. "You're a gone gosling, Templeton, and you've nobody to blame but yourself. You made your mistake when you came and told me of your intentions concerning this mine. Naturally it gave me a start; I'd never dreamed that anyone would ever have reason to open the Skalkaho. So while you were engaged at the stage depot, I got hold of Sheriff Rogan and suggested that he have the town boycott you. That suited Sherm. He's harbored a hatred for the Templetons ever since the bank failure which cost him his savings."

"So that was your scheme!" Jim said grimly. "And I thought it was only to force me out of Riata. I never suspected that the big idea was to keep me out of this mine."

"That rifle bullet I fired at you last night should have told you I meant business. And that's where I made *my* mistake. I presumed you were either dead or sufficiently impressed to turn back. But when I made a trip up here today, I found you hard at work removing rock. I could have shot you in the back, but I saw a better way of disposing of you. And it pleased my fancy to have you dig your own grave by opening the Skalkaho. I fetched another powder keg up here this afternoon, Templeton. I've just toted it to this rock pile. Do you see how very simple it's all going to be?"

This man was mad, not in the wild, raging way of a locoed steer, but in the calm, calculating manner of a person who lets nothing stand be-

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tween him and his desires. Jim understood that now, and, sweat beading his forehead, he whispered frantically to Laverne.

"Have a look around my father's skeleton!" he urged. "There's just a chance he might have been toting a gun when he was lured up here. And there's a smaller chance that such a gun might still work. Hurry!"

Louder, he said: "You'll never get away with this, Goodnight. Nobody thought to look for dad; with him gone and the bank's money gone, they jumped to a natural conclusion. But now you've got three to get rid of. Laverne Howie's down here; Billy must have told you she was along. And there's Billy, himself. And me."

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of that?" Goodnight countered. "Doubtless Mountain-Pacific will be interested when their rising young surveyor vanishes from the face of the earth. But you told me yourself that your scheme of opening the Skalkaho was your own secret. You meant to surprise your superiors by fetching back an accurate report in record time, remember? Miss Howie will be missed, too, and doubtless Sheriff Rogan will conduct quite a search in his own blundering way. He may even come here, but he'll only presume that another landslide has buried the Skalkaho's opening even deeper than before. And Billy? Who'll care about him? Not even his father, for Josh Blue won't be returning to Riata. That drunken fool has bled me for the last time!"

"Bled you—" Understanding smote Jim. "So that's how Josh was getting his money! Blackmailing you! Then he must have had some inkling of the truth behind that bank failure years ago. Working in the bank at that time, he could have picked up a clue."

"He suspected more than he really knew," Goodnight said angrily. "But nimbler wits might have made sense out of the things he could have said. For nearly eighteen years I kept him in whiskey and gambling money. But I pay him no more." He turned silent for a moment. "Now!" he announced with satisfaction. "The fuse is cut to the proper length. It's a short fuse, Templeton. It will give me time to get safely away, but not too far away. I'll still be able to shoot you if you show yourself."

Jim could hear him moving, clambering down off the outer rock pile, and Jim turned then toward Laverne. The girl stood below him, clutching the candle in one hand, a small, leather-bound notebook in the other.

"Did you find a gun?" Jim demanded.

She shook her head. "Only some keys and some small change and this notebook—"

"He's lit the fuse!" Jim cut in. "He's set to seal us in here forever. But I'm going out through that opening!"

Instantly Laverne had her hand on his arm, her fingers biting deep. "I heard what he said!" she cried. "You can't do it, Jim. He'll shoot you the minute you show yourself. It's suicide!"

"Better than waiting here for the

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powder to go off," Jim said, shaking off her hand. "It's a fighting chance at least."

Then he was clambering up the rock pile, trading haste for caution and making no effort at silence. He thrust his head and shoulders through the opening, and stiffened himself for the shock of a bullet. He could see the twilight-hazed slope, the heaped rocks, the powder keg almost within reach. And he could see Billy Blue's unconscious figure sprawled a few feet away, waiting there oblivious to the greater oblivion that was coming. He could see Caleb Goodnight, too. The tall, black-clad banker was still scurrying down the slope, but the man turned, and as he did so, he spied Jim. A gun came up in Goodnight's hand, and a bullet drove a splinter of rock into Jim's cheek.

Still Jim struggled to force himself through that opening. And then he was on his hands and knees on the outer rock pile, the bullets peppering about him, but it wasn't till he came to a stand that the first one found him, high in the hip. He felt no pain, he was too excited for that; he knew only a numbing sensation of shock. He swept his eyes to right and left, hoping desperately that Goodnight had overlooked the gun that he, Jim, had discarded, but the gun was gone. And the fuse sputtering from the powder keg was almost too short for the eye to see.

A bullet burned along Jim's shoulder, another creased the hard flesh that armored his ribs. And then he had his hands on the powder keg, but there was no time to jerk the fuse. Hoisting the keg, he raised it above his head and hurled it—hurled it far out over the rock pile and down the slope to where Caleb Goodnight stood spread-legged, frantically firing at him.

Goodnight saw that keg coming, and he turned and ran, wildly, desperately, and he was running when the powder let go. The rocks beneath Jim trembled, and the sky was suddenly blotted out. The strength slipped away from Jim then, and he went down in a sprawling heap, and it was only then that he realized that Laverne had also come crawling out through the opening and was by his side.

"Goodnight?" he gasped.

"Dead," she replied, an edge of hysteria to her voice. "I can see him from here. And . . . and I can see that there's no harm left in him now. And Billy's safe, Jim. He's stirring awake. But look, here comes Sheriff Rogan riding!"

The big-bodied sheriff was forcing a horse toward them as fast as the tilting trail would permit, and, coming out of his saddle, he made a brief examination of Goodnight's remains, then lumbered to the rock pile.

"What in thunder's going on here?" he demanded. "Have you turned killer, Templeton?"

There was no strength in Jim to make a coherent reply, but Laverne had her voice. Angrily she said: "You'll find Bailey Templeton's skeleton inside the Skalkaho, Rogan. And you'll find this notebook of interest. It was written in darkness

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while Jim's dad was waiting for death from suffocation to come to him, and it tells how Caleb Goodnight lured him here eighteen years ago and sealed him in the shaft. Does that explain who got the bank's missing money? Josh Blue was the only one who suspected the truth. And Goodnight, who was paying old Josh blackmail money, just the same as admitted killing Josh, too."

Rogan glanced at the notebook, his heavy brows furrowing. "That adds up," he said. "In fact it was on account of Josh Blue that I came up here. I was looking for Billy, and folks reported seeing him and you ride out of town today, Miss Howie, heading in this direction. I've some bad news for Billy, though I don't reckon he'll take it too hard. The sheriff over at Hoedown, on the trail to Butte, wired me that he found Josh bushwhacked."

He glanced at Jim, and he had to grope for words, this sheriff of Riata. He was a harsh, hard-fisted man, not too long on imagination, and he'd nursed his hatred for eighteen years. He said gruffly: "We'll have to get you patched and made comfortable, feller, while we fetch a sawbones up here. Can you lend me a hand with him, Miss Howie?"

"Rock samples," Jim whispered. "Get me some rock samples from inside Skalkaho."

"Don't you worry," Laverne said, smiling. "We'll get those samples, and we'll see that they're sent to your railroad people. A lot of folks are going to be just as ashamed of themselves as Sherm Rogan is right now, Jim. You'll find all of Riata anxious to do things for the hometown boy who came back."

"That's fine . . . fine," he said weakly. "Take good care of Billy for me, till I'm on my feet."

Laverne's hand closed over his. "Billy has you to make up for the loss of his father, Jim," she said. "But has it occurred to you that he needs a mother too?"

Jim caught her meaning instantly; he wasn't too far gone for that. He had made the Templeton name clean again; he could bestow it upon her with pride and love and a faith restored.

THE END

THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Our boys won't be home until they've got every outlaw Jap an' Nazi thrown an' hogtied—an' it's up to us to make that day come sooner by roundin' up

EXTRA WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

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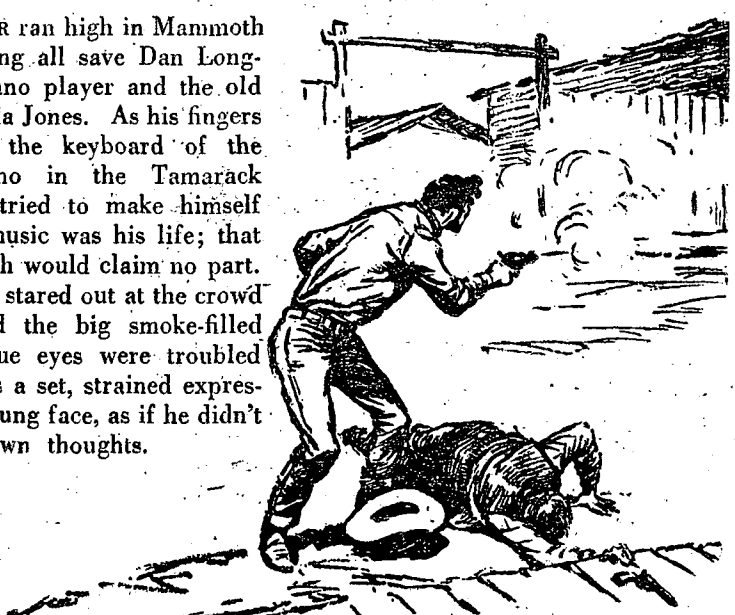
PLAY THE CARDS,

by DEAN OWEN

Dan Longstreet held that guns and music don't mix but two bounty hunters changed his mind with a six-shooter serenade

I

GOLD FEVER ran high in Mammoth Camp, touching all save Dan Longstreet, the piano player and the old outlaw, Nevada Jones. As his fingers flashed over the keyboard of the battered piano in the Tamarack House, Dan tried to make himself believe that music was his life; that guns and death would claim no part. And yet as he stared out at the crowd which packed the big smoke-filled room, his blue eyes were troubled and there was a set, strained expression on his young face, as if he didn't believe his own thoughts.



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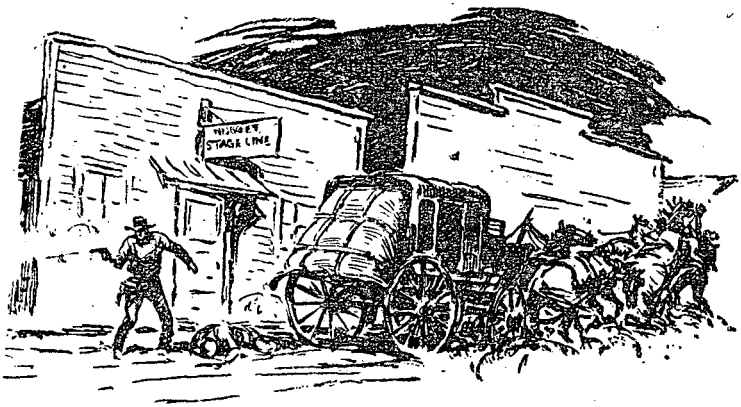
TENDERFOOT!

Without missing a note, Dan leaned over to the bald-headed oldster, who sat next to him, scraping away on an ancient fiddle.

"You shouldn't have come here, Nevada," Dan said sharply, his voice carrying above the clatter of the piano and the squeak of the violin.



"It was too early to come out of the hills. You should have waited another month."

Old Nevada Jones looked at Dan over the top of the violin. He was as ancient and battered as the fiddle under his chin.

"I'm through runnin', Dan. Me playin' fiddle to your piano is the only happiness I got left. If a gent can't be happy, he's better off dead."

"Or in the penitentiary at Carson City," Dan said bluntly. "It'll be life this time if they catch you."

"They won't."

Up on the small stage above the piano, Happy Hinds, a juggler, was doing fancy things with Indian clubs, while Dan and old Nevada Jones played soft music. No one paid much attention to the act.

Night in Mammoth Camp meant only an interlude when men could drink and gamble and await the rise of the sun, so that they could return to their diggings for more gold. The hooded overhead lamps caught the feverish light in the eyes of every

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gambler, every miner, every dance-hall girl in the Tamarack House, as their thoughts turned to the yellow metal which men were digging out of the earth, here at the foot of the Sierras.

Dan Longstreet's thoughts were not on gold or his claim at the foot of Cloudy Mountain. He was thinking of the debt he owed Nevada Jones. His forehead was pinched in a frown and a lock of yellow hair fell across his brow as he bent to pound out a chord for the finish of Happy Hinds' act. There was a splatter of applause and the juggler ducked into the wings off the small stage.

Old Nevada Jones put down his fiddle and ran a hand over his seamed, leathery face. His cheeks still showed signs of the prison pallor put there by seven years spent behind the walls of the pen at Carson City.

"I got lonesome up there in the hills," Nevada said, as if trying to justify his sudden appearance in Mammoth Camp. "We're pardners, ain't we?"

Dan stared moodily at the crowd which milled around the big place. "What about the Lannick brothers?" he asked Nevada.

The old man lifted a mug of beer from the floor by his chair. He took a sip and sat there, staring at Dan, ignoring the fuzz the foam had put on his long gray mustache.

"If the Lannicks come, I'll be ready for 'em," he said in his wheezy old voice. "Don't be mad, Danny. I had to come."

When Dan thought of the Lannick brothers, he went cold. Automatically his hand went to his left side, where a bullet from Mitch Lannick's gun had almost taken his life. And as he sat there before the piano, he could not forget that he was alive only because of Nevada Jones.

He remembered the adventure of coming across the mountains from San Francisco with a theatrical troupe, six months before. The dazzle and glitter of Virginia City; the fabulous Piper's Opera House. The old man with the pale face, who was Nevada Jones, hanging around with a battered fiddle under his arm.

Then the night backstage when Mitch Lannick had come in feeling mean and full of whiskey. He came to take out one of the girls in the show.

Seeing that Mitch Lannick was drunk, Dan said, "Better wait until another night. Rose told me to tell you she doesn't feel well."

Whereupon Lannick cursed at Dan and accused him of horning in. The two men went at it, and when Dan knocked Lannick spinning, the man came up with an oath and a smoking gun in his hand. His bullet dropped Dan to the floor.

That was when old Nevada Jones, who had been hanging around the stage door with his fiddle, threw a slug from a big gun that caught Lannick in the leg.

And as he lay there on the floor, Dan remembered Lannick's words: "Damn you, Nevada Jones. I'll get you for this. Me and my brother will be on your tail till hell freezes over!"

The show moved back to San Fran-

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cisco, but Dan was weak and sick. And as the weeks passed, he got back his strength in the little shack where Nevada lived on the edge of Virginia City. There was blood poisoning and a long battle, but the old man pulled Dan through.

All those things Dan remembered and he knew he owed a debt. But he believed there was a way to pay that debt; pay it without guns, without the smear of powder smoke and the letting of blood. And he must find a way. . . .

Bert Torbray, who owned the Tamarack House, came over, leaving a trail of cigar smoke in his wake. He put his big hands on the brass rail that set the musicians apart from the rest of the crowd.

"Nice fiddling, old-timer," he said to Nevada Jones. "All the musicians who come here to work quit to dig gold after the first day. That is, all except Dan. He does his digging in the daytime, his playing at night. Dan's a smart boy."

Dan let his fingers run over the keyboard as he looked up at Torbray, trying to read what lay behind those black eyes. He saw the sheen of expensive cloth in his black suit, the sparkle of the diamond in his shirt. In the month that Dan had been playing the piano in the Tamarack House, he had never gotten close to Torbray. The man was cold, aloof, and yet there were times when his eyes seemed to lose their frost and a human smile touched his lips.

"He's a friend of mine," Dan said of Nevada Jones. "But he's only passing through. He isn't staying in Mammoth."

"We'll let the old man decide that," Torbray said coldly. He turned to Nevada Jones, who sat hunched in his chair, his old eyes wary. "Stick with me and do your fiddling. I'll make it worth your while."

Before Nevada Jones could answer, Torbray turned his broad back and held up his hands, bellowing for silence. The noise in the big saloon tapered off, as all eyes swung to the big man. Folks said that Torbray had won the Tamarack House on the turn of a card. Since that time, his was the only voice of authority in Mammoth. So far no one had questioned that authority.

Torbray's voice was a rumble in the big room. "We've got some hard-working boys here," he said, jerking a heavy thumb over his shoulder at Dan and Nevada behind the brass rail. "If you gents want to dance, don't forget to pay off."

From then on, silver dollars and gold pieces were tossed over the brass rail at Dan and Nevada Jones. And Dan saw the old man's face light up as he tucked his fiddle under his bony chin. The dance floor was crowded as miners and cowboys and Easterners in white shirts and low-heeled shoes, swung Torbray's percentage girls to the music.

And as the music rolled on and sweat put a shine on Dan Longstreet's tanned face, he forgot about the Lannick brothers and their guns. Then when he and Nevada Jones paused for breath and the dance floor cleared, it was all brought back to him.

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Nevada pulled a long-barreled gun from his belt and laid it on the floor by his chair.

"Can't get my wind with that shootin' iron pokin' me in the belly," Nevada Jones said with a grin.

Dan's eyes were on the gun and he felt his mouth go dry. He was thinking of Mitch Lannick and the pain and shock of the bullet from his gun. He went over to where Bert Torbray leaned against the wall, his somber eyes on the drunken crowd.

II

When Torbray saw him, he asked: "Come to take my offer for your claim?"

Dan shook his head. Torbray looked down at the piano player, seeing the clean-cut features, the yellow hair and metallic blue eyes.

"You say you want music here," Dan said. "Will you help my friend, the fiddle player, if there's trouble?"

For a minute Torbray didn't answer. Then he said: "I reckon Nevada Jones can take care of himself."

Dan's blue eyes showed their surprise. "You know Nevada?"

Torbray grunted. "Who hasn't heard of the fiddle-playing curly wolf who used to rod as tough a bunch as ever come out of the hills? His boys rode into a bushwhack trap one time and Nevada was the only one to come out alive. He just got out of the pen at Carson City after doing a stretch."

"That isn't any sign he isn't all right now."

For a minute, Torbray didn't answer, then he looked over at the railed-in enclosure beneath the stage where Nevada Jones was sawing away on his old fiddle.

"I wouldn't bet a plugged Mex dollar on him. I hear the law's lookin' for him again."

Dan's face whitened. "You know the story. I guess there's no use in trying."

He turned to go back to the piano and Torbray said, "Who wants Nevada's hide nailed to the fence this time?"

Dan swung back, new hope showing in his eyes. "The Lannick brothers. They're detectives for the Mountain and Central Line. A month ago the station agent at Washoe Junction was held up and five thousand in bullion that was waiting to be shipped, was stolen. The Lannick brothers say it was Nevada and one of his old pardners."

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A cold smile rippled for a moment on Torbray's lips. "That sounds like Nevada Jones, all right."

Dan shook his head emphatically. "He didn't do it. Washoe Junction is a good thirty miles from Virginia City, where Nevada and I were living. He was with me the night of the robbery, dead drunk."

"You've got a good claim up on Cloudy Mountain; you've got a good job here," Torbray told him. "You're a smart kid, Dan, but you're wasting your time with Nevada Jones. You can't reform an old coot like him. He'll drop that fiddle and go gunning for some gent's poke the minute the sign is right. I've seen too many of 'em."

Dan's face went tight. "He saved my life and stuck by me when my friends pulled out and left me for dead. I haven't forgotten that."

Only by a slight lift of his heavy black brows did Torbray show that the earnest note in Dan's voice had touched him. "What you want me to do?" he asked finally.

"You want music here. Why can't you discourage the Lannicks if they show up? You just about run things in Mammoth Camp."

Torbray smiled thinly at the last. "Thanks for the compliment." He put a match to the cigar he took from his breast pocket. When he had it going, he said: "You're taking it the hard way, teaming up with Nevada Jones. But if that's the way you want it, I'll see what I can do."

Dawnlight was graying the eastern sky when Dan and old Nevada Jones trudged down the main street of Mammoth Camp toward Dan's claim on Big Fish Creek.

"You stay out at the diggings," Dan told Nevada. "Keep out of sight until we're sure the Lannicks didn't follow you when you quit the hills."

But Nevada Jones was stubborn. And that night when Dan went down the slant toward the garish lights of Mammoth Camp, old Nevada Jones walked at his side, fiddle case under his arm.

Dan made another plea as they neared the town. There was a sober light in Nevada's eyes as he looked at Dan.

"After a gent's spent most of his life ridin' a smoky trail and took seven years at Carson pen, he ain't worried about the future." Nevada patted the old fiddle case with a weathered hand. "I can drop this and make my music with a six-shooter, if the Lannicks come!"

"You should have stuck to music instead of the gun," Dan said and regretted his words the moment they were uttered.

But Nevada Jones only smiled, as they walked on down toward Mammoth Camp. "Music and guns do mix, Dan. A drunk schoolteacher come out to our ranch when I was a kid. He left St. Louis to git away from his wife. He was a long-haired duck with a solemn face and he taught me to play the fiddle. But afterwards he took another name, and folks got to know him as Smoky Joe Rogers, as tough a gun-slammer as ever rode a long trail. Smoky Joe Rogers liked the owlhoot; I never did. It was badge-toters like the

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Lannicks that euchered me into it."

Dan was thoughtful for a moment, as they swung into the main street of Mammoth Camp. "I still say you can keep out of trouble and avoid using guns. But you have to hold in your temper and figure another way out."

Nevada Jones laughed at that. "Mitch Lannick wasn't botherin' with such fancy stuff the night he put a slug in you at Virginia City."

And Dan felt his cheeks grow hot, for he knew the old man spoke the truth.

Dan Longstreet expected trouble. He could tell by the way his fingers tightened over the piano keys, by the tense feeling in his wrists.

It was just before midnight when the Lannicks walked in and sat with their backs to the wall by the front door. Dan shot a quick glance at Nevada, but the old man had not seen the pair of railroad detectives.

"Going to stretch my legs," Dan told Nevada. "Scratch out a number on your fiddle."

He wondered if Nevada caught the strained note in his voice. But he guessed not, for the old man swung into a tune and the dance floor filled up.

Dan's knees felt weak as he walked over to where Bert Torbray stood at the end of the bar. He looked up at the big gambler and nodded toward the front door.

"The Lannicks just came in," he said, and stood there, waiting for some emotion to show on Torbray's cold face.

"Anybody can come here and drink as long as he doesn't start trouble," Torbray said. "That goes for railroad detectives as well as anybody else."

"But you said you'd help."

Torbray looked at the end of the cold cigar he took from his lips. "I only said that I'd see what I could do."

"What if Nevada and the Lannicks shoot it out here?" There was a thread of tension in Dan's voice. "Nevada won't go to prison without a fight."

"You've got to play the cards the way they fall," Torbray said. "You'll learn that after you've been in this country a while."

Anger brought dark blood to Dan Longstreet's cheeks. He turned on his heel and threaded his way through the crowd. So far, the jam of customers in the big saloon had screened Nevada Jones from the eyes of the Lannicks. But any minute they might spot the old outlaw.

III

When Mitch Lannick saw Dan walking toward him, his narrow, vicious face went tight with rage. He started to get out of his chair but Kurt Lannick put a big hand on his brother's wrist, forcing him back down.

Kurt Lannick was a good seventy pounds heavier than his brother. His face was square and his eyes were a dirty green, murky as unwashed bottle glass.

"You're the damn piano player that got me a bullet!" Mitch Lannick said. He glared up at Dan,

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who stood beside the table. Then he turned to his brother. "Nevada Jones put a slug in my leg on account of this gent."

A cold smile touched Kurt Lannick's big mouth. "That slug was worth a lot of money," he said softly.

Dan leaned forward, his slim hands resting on the table top. His stomach seemed to get hollow and cold, but he fought to keep his voice level.

"I know why you're here, so let's not beat around the bush."

Mitch Lannick's thin lips curled. "You know a hell of a lot then."

At Dan's words, Kurt Lannick's green eyes had narrowed. He lifted a big hand to silence his brother who was at the point of speaking again. "Go ahead, let's hear some more," he said to Dan.

"Why don't you give Nevada Jones a chance?" Dan said earnestly. "I know he didn't pull that holdup at Washoe Junction."

At mention of Nevada's name, both brothers stiffened. Kurt Lannick's eyes showed mild surprise. "How come you're sure Nevada ain't guilty?"

"He was with me the day of the holdup. And he was too drunk to move."

The two brothers exchanged glances. A tight smile played over Mitch Lannick's lips and there was a light of sudden understanding in his eyes. He cocked his head to one side, as if hearing the squeaky fiddle for the first time.

"That, I take it, is Nevada Jones, sawin' away as usual," Mitch Lannick said. He leaned back in his chair and laughed.

Dan's face went tight, whereupon Kurt Lannick said: "We're on our way to Los Angeles. But we can take time out to haul Nevada Jones back to Carson City."

Mitch Lannick's mouth was a thin line across his face. "The Mountain and Central will pay good money for Nevada Jones—dead or alive. It don't matter which to me. Personally I'd like to put a slug in him, sort of to pay him back for what he did to me."

All the time Mitch Lannick had been talking, horrible realization was dawning slowly on Dan Longstreet. He tried to swallow the hard lump in his throat.

"You didn't follow Nevada here?" he asked, a note of strain in his voice.

Kurt Lannick shook his head. "You talked too soon, kid." Then he leaned his heavy arms on the table, his voice lowering to a confidential tone. "The Mountain and Central Line is quite a ways from here, kid. This is California, not Nevada. We might forget about Nevada Jones—if the price was right."

Dan licked his lips and Mitch Lannick took his cue from his brother. "All we're interested in is the dinero Nevada's hide will bring."

There was a moment when Dan tried to get his thoughts into a sensible pattern. Nevada Jones had quit playing and the dance floor was beginning to clear. Cold fear lodged in Dan's stomach when he thought of what might happen if Nevada spotted the Lannick brothers. Then

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somebody yelled for more music, and the old fiddle began its sing-song wail once again. Dan let the air out of his lungs and looked down at the pair of railroad detectives at the table.

Dan pushed back a chair, sat down at the table with the two men. "I'll raise the money. How . . . how much will you take?"

"Three thousand," answered Kurt Lannick. "The Mountain and Central price is five. We'll take a loss because we're in a hurry to get to Los Angeles."

"Give me until tomorrow," Dan said.

There was no emotion, no feeling at all showing on Kurt Lannick's face. "Might be we could make a deal. It'll be tomorrow mornin' or nothing, kid."

Dan nodded. "But keep out of sight. If Nevada sees you he might start shooting."

Mitch Lannick grinned crookedly. "Suits me."

His brother shook his head. "We'll take the three thousand. And don't forget. There was two in on that holdup at Washoe Junction. You admitted that you was with Nevada Jones that night."

A flash of heat and cold passed through Dan's body. He opened his mouth to say something, but Mitch Lannick didn't give him a chance.

"Don't forget, you may be buyin' your own freedom with that three thousand."

Then they were gone, pushing through the crowd that milled around the swing doors. Dan started for the piano, then changed his mind. He went down a corridor that branched off the hall leading to the dressing rooms behind the small stage. He was conscious of the cold sweat on his brow when he knocked on the door of Bert Torbray's office.

Inside the small office, he found the owner of the Tamarack House counting stacks of gold coins. Torbray looked up at Dan and pointed at the gold.

"Beats digging it out of the ground."

Dan nodded and Torbray took a cigar from a box on the desk, licked the wrapper and settled back in his swivel chair.

"What's on your mind, kid?"

"You told me that if I ever wanted to sell my claim, you'd buy it. I'm here to sell."

Dan was conscious of old Nevada's screeching fiddle, the mumble of voices, the clink of glassware from the big room.

A fleeting smile crossed Torbray's lips. "I've changed my mind," he said bluntly. "I've got more money out now than is safe. I don't want to extend myself any more at the present time."

Dark blood touched Dan's cheeks and he leaned forward in sudden anger. "Listen, Torbray, you didn't change your mind that quick. You've got something up your sleeve."

Torbray stared at Dan through the blue screen of tobacco smoke from his cigar. "I'm a gambler. I only bet on a sure thing."

The words of the big man stung Dan, but he fought to control his temper. While he gathered his

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thoughts, he forced his eyes from Torbray's face, seeing the big wall safe in the corner, the glass gun case above it filled with all sorts of fancy weapons.

"I guess out here it's dog eat dog. San Francisco was bad enough. But it was never like this—never this rotten."

For an instant Torbray's eyes glittered, then he shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Remember what I told you about playing the cards as they fall?"

Dan shook his head. "Yesterday you wanted my claim. Today you're backing down."

"I felt sorry for you, kid, that's all. You're a piano player, and a good one. You'll stiffen your fingers in time, digging in that muck all day. But it looks as if your claim at Cloudy Mountain isn't worth the price of the land. No claim at that end of the creek has paid out. The gold's at the other end."

"Then you don't want it?"

"I don't want it. You've got to play it smart out here. And that's what you're not doing. Teaming up with Nevada Jones will get you nothing but a bullet in the back or a hang rope."

Anger was shooting a flame into Dan's mind. He backed to the door. "You won't buy my claim because you saw me talking to the Lannicks. You think I'll either leave with Nevada or get killed by the Lannicks. Either way you think you can step in and take over my claim."

Bert Torbray flicked the diamond in his black tie and seemed to be thinking of something to say. "You better watch your tongue, kid. Some men would kill you for that." Then that fleeting smile returned to his lips. "Get out there and play something. You've got plenty of time to figure a way out. And remember what I told you. Play the cards as they fall."

Dan Longstreet went out into the rush and roar of the Tamarack House. He stood there, trying to figure out what to do next. And he wondered just how far loyalty went. Did he owe all this to Nevada Jones?

Before he had a chance to think further on the subject, Bert Torbray came by. "Better get to work, Dan. I'm paying you to play the piano, not stand around."

Dan saw the man beckon to one of his bouncers. They went outside and Dan walked to the piano.

Old Nevada Jones seemed to sense that something was wrong, but he said nothing. He just sat there on his chair, a troubled light in his old eyes.

Dan's fingers refused to work right when he sat down at the piano and he muffed several notes when Lottie Malone came out on the stage for a song. She glared down at him over a full bosom when she finished her first song.

"You tryin' to ruin my act, or are you drunk?" she snapped.

"Neither, Lottie," Dan said and played the introduction to her next number.

"And tell grandpa to lay off the fiddle. He's worse than you, if possible."

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She took a hitch at her corset to take a deep breath. When she finished her song, the crowd applauded. Lottie went back into the wings after giving Dan an icy stare.

Old Nevada put his fiddle down on the floor beside his chair. "What's wrong, Danny?" he asked.

Dan got up from his chair and walked back toward the dressing rooms at the rear of the stage, Nevada at his heels. Dan's heart was pumping wildly. He had to make a decision and make it fast. He reflected how peaceful his life had been in San Francisco and he longed for the comparative protection a big city afforded one who was not used to the ways of violence.

He waited until Nevada was back in the dark corridor before he spoke. "There's no use in not telling it straight," he said tensely. "The Lannick brothers are here. We've got to move on."

Dan started to pull Nevada toward the dressing rooms, but the old man balked. It was dark here and one side of the hall was lined with barrels and empty packing boxes.

"There ain't no use you gittin' in on this," Nevada said. "I should have knowed the Lannicks would follow me. An old coot like me with a fiddle under his arm is too easy to trail."

Dan shook his head. "The Lannicks didn't even know you were here. If I'd kept my mouth shut, things might have worked out differently." He was thinking of what Bert Torbray had said about playing the cards as they fell.

For a moment Nevada Jones didn't answer. Then he squared his shoulders. "You been a good friend, Danny. You was only tryin' to do what you thought was right. You stay. I'll go."

"We're in this together. The Lannicks are trying to make out that we both were in on that holdup at Washoe Junction. Come on."

Dan was conscious of Nevada's sharp intake of breath. Out front, the crowd was beginning to yell: "We want music! We want music!"

Then Nevada said: "I done a lot of things in my life, Danny, but I never let down a friend."

"I believe you," Dan said, a note of irritation in his voice. "But come on. . . ."

It was then that he felt a premonition of danger. In the faint light that seeped in through the heavy curtains covering the front end of the corridor, Dan saw movement. He tried to duck the down sweep of the gun in Nevada's hand. The barrel slanted expertly behind his ear. That was the last thing he remembered, for it seemed as if the roof had fallen in on him.

IV

Darkness pressed around Dan Longstreet when he finally opened his eyes and consciousness returned like a finger of light in his brain, ever-widening as the seconds passed. As if from a great distance, he could hear the buzz of many voices and the rattle of glassware. His strength began to return and he was able to get to his knees, but the movement brought a stabbing pain to his head.

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He got to his feet and found that he had been lying behind an empty packing box in the corridor.

Then the whole picture came back with startling clarity. The Lannick brothers . . . Nevada Jones.

"The old fool," Dan thought in sudden panic. "He'll try to gun them down."

And the thought brought sweat to his forehead. He knew that in that old derelict of the dark trails he had found a companionship that had been welded in gunsmoke. This was the first time in his life that someone had needed him. For the first time in his life Dan realized that there were more important things than music and the easy life. There was the debt that one man owed another. . . .

He groped down the hall toward the heavy drapes that covered the entrance to the barroom. And at that moment a door opened and Lottie Malone came out of a dressing room. She half turned, saw Dan and her fat cheeks quivered. Her mouth opened but no sound came and her eyes were wide and dark with fright.

Dan stepped forward. "Lottie, wait . . ."

But at that moment, the buxom singer found her voice and she let go with a scream that could have been heard at Ringer's Peak, nine miles up the canyon.

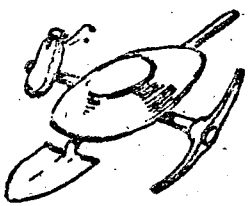
"It's him! The killer! Help!"

And for a shattered second there was silence in the saloon. Then boots pounded the floor and chairs were overturned as men rushed toward the corridor.

Dan saw Lottie Malone dash into her dressing room, slam the door, and heard the clatter as the bolt went home.

Instinctively he whirled and rushed out the back door. There was a shout in the hallway and a gun flamed. Window glass shattered and a sliver cut Dan's cheek. He lurched across the alley, grasped the overhang of a shed roof and pulled himself up. He lay flat as men came pouring out the rear door of the Tamarack House.

Men spread out in both directions along the alleyway. Lantern light cut a yellow glow into the shadows. Lying there, Dan tried to figure out what had happened since Nevada



Jones had laid that gun barrel over his head.

He got the answer when two men came down the alley, evidently from the diggings. And to their question, one of the men who had been hunting for Dan, supplied the answer.

"The piano player and the old coot who played the fiddle, jumped the Lannick brothers, a couple of railroad detectives. The fiddler is Nevada Jones. They both got away, but the Lannicks will get 'em."

Then Bert Torbray came to the rear door of the Tamarack House. "I got a hunch that Nevada Jones is still in town," he said to the men

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in the alley. "When you find the piano player, bring him here and lock him up in the storeroom."

Torbray went back inside the saloon. There was darkness and silence in the alley now that the men were moving up to continue their search in other parts of Mammoth Camp.

Ten minutes later Dan dropped to the ground beside the shed. The sudden jar set his head to throbbing, but he fought off the nausea which swept over him. He guessed that Nevada Jones had tried to gun down both the Lannicks, trying to save his partner, Dan.

"I shouldn't have told him that the Lannicks figured me in on the holdup, too. He did it to save my skin."

Dan pushed those thoughts from his mind as he went in the back door of the Tamarack House. Cautiously he stole down the gloomy passage, ready to flatten himself against the wall if anyone appeared. There was no light under Lottie Malone's dressing room door.

Peeking through the faded green curtains at the end of the hall, he saw Kurt Lannick, his arm in a sling, sitting at a table with his brother. There was a crowd around the table, but a lane had formed momentarily as a waiter came up with bottle and glasses.

Mitch Lannick was saying: "Nevada Jones jumped us in the hotel room. Lucky my brother knocked the lamp off the table. Nevada put a slug in Kurt's arm, but we both nailed him. There was blood in the hall."

"But he got away," a man said.

Kurt Lannick took a drink, his green eyes bright with hatred. "We'll get Nevada. And we'll get the piano player that was with him."

Mitch wiped his lips on the sleeve of his coat. "The railroad wants Nevada Jones and the piano player dead or alive. I'm thinkin' it's dead they'll be."

Some of the men laughed nervously.

Back in the corridor, Dan's heart was bumping his ribs and there was that hard lump back in his throat again. He moved down the hall to Bert Torbray's office. No light showed under the door. He tried the knob and found that he could open the door. Inside, he struck a match and made his way to the gun cabinet he had seen over the safe.

He didn't even fumble with the big padlock. He waited until the noise out front was loudest, then smashed the glass with a paper weight he found on the desk. Striking another match, he surveyed the guns and picked a loaded five-shot bulldog pistol.

He put this in his pocket. Sweat was cold on his forehead as he stood there thinking of what the Lannick brothers had said. It was plain that Nevada Jones had tried to jump the pair in their hotel room. He had been shot. There was blood on the hall carpet.

And as he stood there Dan asked himself what he could possibly gain by all this. Why not run while he had the chance? Panic swept over

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him but he managed to quiet the wild beat of his heart.

He slipped out of Torbray's office and, through the crack in the curtains, saw the Lannicks prepare to leave.

A man in a wide-brimmed hat came in through the door. "Stage for Los Angeles pullin' out, folks," he announced.

The Lannicks got up and headed for the door.

Dan knew what he had to do. He went out through the back door and into the alley and around the far side of the Tamarack House. He knew that all the pieces of this puzzle didn't fit. The Lannicks were going out on that stage. Yet he knew that if there was a chance of collecting a bounty on Nevada Jones, they wouldn't be leaving. It didn't add up. But he didn't have time to think of that.

And right then and there he saw a familiar figure lurching down the boardwalk toward him. It was old Nevada Jones, and he was holding his left hand to his side, dragging one leg after him as if it was weighted down.

At the front of the Tamarack House stood the stagecoach, the driver on top, the four-horse team ready to go.

Dan saw the gun in Nevada's hand. He ran forward, tried to pull the old man into the shadows.

But Nevada shoved him aside. "The Lannicks . . . they got me. It didn't work out. I got to kill 'em, Danny. . . ."

Then Dan Longstreet's heart seemed to crowd up into his throat, for standing there on the boardwalk were the Lannick brothers.

Without thinking of his philosophy that guns and music didn't mix, Dan went into action. The boardwalk cleared suddenly, leaving the Lannicks in full view. Guns whipped up and Dan didn't wait for anything. He just began to fire his short-barreled gun. He was conscious of the roar of Nevada's weapon at his side.

He saw Mitch Lannick pitch sideways, as if hit by a stone. Old Nevada triggered again, then dropped.

Dan saw Mitch Lannick roll over on his back and lift his gun. The man fired and Dan felt the bullet chew into his right leg. He fell to the dusty ground and as he looked up, he saw Kurt Lannick standing there, both legs braced, his gun held steady.

There was no time to think, no time to aim. Dan pulled aside, conscious of the rearing stagecoach team, the shouting men trying to get out of the line of fire. Dan pulled the trigger as fast as he could. He saw Kurt Lannick stumble and put a bullet into the ground. It was so close that gravel stung Dan's face.

Kurt didn't move, but Mitch Lannick was trying to lift his gun from where he lay prone in the gutter beside the boardwalk. Dan knew he didn't have the strength to fire another shot. Mitch Lannick's face was close, then far off. Blackness cut into the corners of his vision.

A pencil point of flame lanced out from the shadows, touched Mitch Lannick's body and the man died

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there in the dusty street of Mammoth Camp.

It was Bert Torbray who came into view, a smoking gun in his hand. After a crowd had gathered and Nevada and Dan were carried to the doctor's office, Torbray looked down at the cot where Dan was lying.

"You almost played your last piano, kid. I didn't buy your claim because I knew the Lannicks would only double-cross you. The station agent at Washoe Junction was in on that holdup. He confessed his part in it when railroad officials confronted him. He piled the deadwood on the Lannicks."

Dan tried to grin, but he couldn't quite make it, the pain in his leg was so intense. "Guess I overplayed my hand."

Torbray smiled. "You sure did. The Lannicks were heading for new range because the law was on their tail for that holdup. They were the boys who got off with the five thousand in bullion."

Old Nevada looked up from the cot across the room and grinned at Dan. "I'm honin' to tuck my fiddle under my chin. Maybe Torbray will give us our jobs back."

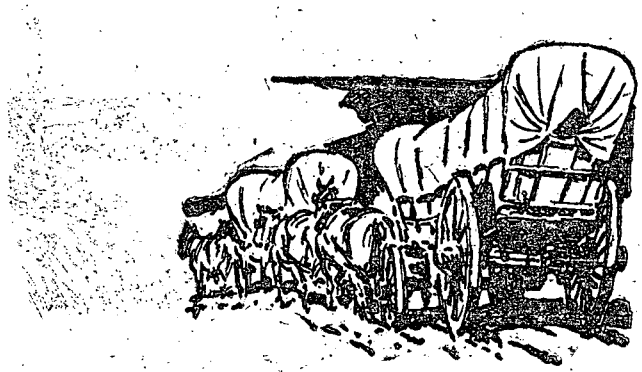
"Soon's you can hobble down to the Tamarack House, you can go to work," Torbray told him. "Meantime, the two of you can loaf up at your claim and maybe dig out a little gold. You got the best piece of dirt on the creek."

While the doctor probed for the bullet in his leg, Dan gritted his teeth and looked up at Torbray. "I reckon everything would have been all right if I'd kept my mouth shut."

"Next time remember to play the cards as they fall," Torbray said.

Just before he passed out, Dan murmured: "I guess that guns and music mix, but it's doggone uncomfortable at times."

THE END



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With Ollie Bishop and a ruthless tough-hand crew waging a relentless battle to grab his land, was Luke Paisley's prized orchard destined to bear a

LEAD FRUIT HARVEST

by PAUL CRAIG

THERE was a menacing look to the three riders moving swiftly up the long slant to the knoll where Luke Paisley stood. A moment earlier they had swept out of a clump of box elder, deep in the ravine, and veered in his direction. It seemed as if they had been waiting there for him to show and blunder into their trap.

Luke was certain it was a trap. He looked again at the three dead steers, each with a delta of drying blood fanning over its mottled nose from a bullet hole in its forehead. He looked once more at the rail fence

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he had labored all spring to throw around his orchard to protect it from the cattle.

These were Diamond Dot carcasses, and the oncomers were Diamond Dot riders. Luke dropped his hand uneasily to the cedarwood butt of the six-gun on his hip but drew it away hastily. He was no gunman, and even if he were it would be foolhardy to make a show of antagonism.

Ollie Bishop was the straw boss in charge of the summering Diamond Dot herd, newly arrived in Lulea Valley. Hap Flint and Woody Jackson flanked him as they rode. Luke had met up with the trio on several previous occasions, and each time relations had worsened.

Bishop's features were contorted in simulated anger as he pulled his claybank to a stop and turned small, protuberent eyes toward Luke. "Caught you red-handed, squatter!" he roared. "You didn't know we was riding up that gully, did you?" His partners pulled abreast of him, and none was actor enough to conceal his pleasure in the situation.

Luke regarded them with unflinching eyes. "You didn't catch me at anything, Bishop! I got a hunch you killed your own steers, knowing I was coming along my fence line. I heard the shots."

Ollie Bishop swung to the ground, the others following. He stalked toward Luke Paisley. Any one of the three was a bigger man than Luke, and the combination brought out the bullying instinct in their kind.

"You can prove you didn't do it!" Bishop snapped, "if you can produce a clean gun barrel! Show that, and we'll admit somebody else killed them steers!"

Luke frowned. They must have heard his shooting, practice shots he had fired at random as he followed his snaky rail fence. The barrel of his six was fouled, all right, and all but two of the chambers had been exploded.

"I can't do that," he acknowledged. "I've been target-shooting ever since you told me to light out of Lulea Valley. I was practicing as I came around the orchard."

Ollie Bishop slapped his hip, throwing back his shaggy head in raucous laughter. "So you been practicing up to gun us, huh?" He looked at his consorts, then his gaze shot back to Luke, suddenly cold and evil. "I'll make you a target, pilgrim!"

An icy reaction went through Luke Paisley. He was new to the ways of the West, but he understood this thing. That dead steer bait had been designed as a murder trap. The anger that rose in him nearly forced him into it, regardless.

"I'm no fool, Bishop!" he returned, after a long moment. "I heard how you shot up that sheeper, down in Duncanville last week. You and your bully boys baited him into it, knowing you'd have the edge on him even with one hand tied behind you. I'm not scaring out, but I'm not playing the fool, either!"

The Diamond Dot straw boss relaxed slowly from his killer stance. "I figured you was yellow as a canary!" he taunted. "But don't forget this: You declared war on the

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Diamond Dot when you plugged them cows! You was riding high and mighty when you planted your trees on our range! But they're going to bring you a lead harvest, pilgrim!"

Luke found himself trembling as he watched the three men ride away. The thing he had feared for a number of weeks had come at last. He stood there until they had dropped down the slant and disappeared into the gully again, his lips twisted bitterly.

Following the rail fence along the eastern rim of the saucer, Luke made his way down to his cabin in the locust grove on Feather Creek. Most of the fertile upland valley was covered by the homestead claim he had filed when he arrived on the Columbia River the previous autumn. Nature seemed to have made it especially for his needs.

From the start there had been many to call Luke Paisley a fool, though not until the coming of the Diamond Dot summering herd had anybody challenged his rights in Lulea Valley. Like many another farmer, Luke had brought a plough across the plains, but he had brought two other things that were uniquely his own. The first was a stock of nearly nine hundred nursery trees, the other a private dream.

Eighteen months earlier Luke had been working for a nursery in the East with no thought of the Oregon Country. His one ambition had been to marry Dora Patterson and grow trees and explore their fascinating mysteries. Then Dora's health had failed, and the doctor had spoken of the need for a high, dry climate. Dora's brother, Jim, had been Luke's closest friend, and the two began to spin a plan.

Luke had come West to find land and get established. The next year Jim and Dora were to follow with a thousand more young apple trees. Dora would get well, and marriage would follow, as would the fulfillment of the new project.

In this high, dry and well-watered upland valley Luke had found his private promised land and filed on it promptly. He arrived late in autumn, with barely time to plough the twelve acres that he set out to apple trees during the winter. He lived in a tent until his young trees were safely rooting in the ground, then he built his cabin. As spring approached his labors multiplied. He heard of the cattle herds that came to the uplands to feed each summer and instantly recognized their menace to his young orchard. He could not hope to fence his entire claim, but he had labored all through the spring splitting rails and building the zigzag barricade around the twelve acres.

With Ollie Bishop's declaration of war ringing in his ears, Luke built a fire in his cook stove and started to fix his noon day meal. Over several cups of coffee he smoked and pondered his predicament. The Diamond Dot had always had free run of the grassy mountain meadow that was now Luke Paisley's. He had fenced in the handiest watering stretch on the deep-bedded creek. Bishop and his men meant to make a fight for it and a dirty one.

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Yet Luke Paisley was poorly equipped to go up against three trained and ruthless gunmen. He had no taste for it. Patience was necessary to a man who worked with trees, and Luke had that in abundance. It was senseless to crash head on into the obstacles that confronted a man. When he met one he could not overcome fairly, the smart thing was to retreat, change direction and proceed on a new tack.

Luke understood clearly that his was not the say in the matter. Ollie Bishop was bringing the fight to him with cunning and menacing impact. Luke did not know where to expect the first attack or what to do to meet it. The only thing was to wait and hope.

After he had eaten, Luke spanned up his team and hooked it to the plough. He meant to turn under another fifteen acres of soil, getting it ready for the trees Jim and Dora would bring.

Luke had barely cut his first furrow and was blowing the team when something caused him to glance to southward. It had been some faint sound rebounding in his taut-nerved alertness. His gaze knifed along the sparse fringe of jackpine on the rim of the saucer, then suddenly fixed.

Out of the distant cover broke a swiftly moving mass. He stared at it for a moment before he understood that it was moving cattle. As they spilled into the open they fanned out. They were racing toward him, coming down the trough of the little valley.

Luke had heard of this thing, though it was the first time he had ever seen it. From the surge of the mass he understood that it was a stampede, moving toward him, threatening to surge over him and his orchard.

The fascination of terror held Luke for a long moment. The mass was half a mile away yet and there might be time for him to unspan the team and ride it to safety, but of what use was safety if his orchard was ground to ruin by those flashing hoofs?

His hands numbed to clumsiness, Luke unhooked the horses, but he did not ride out of harm's way. Slapping an animal across the rump, he sent them toward the rim. They seemed to sense the danger and broke into a frenzied gallop.

Luke turned to face the charging cattle, weak in every fibre, a pilgrim alone against a stampede. He did not know what he could do, but he stood there with his back to his precious trees, his face toward the menace. His mind worked dimly, seeming no part of him yet trying to think of what he had heard of such things. He knew the oncoming mass was a berserk and senseless unity, that it would respond as a unity if he could veer its point enough to make it miss the orchard.

Pulling his six-gun from holster, he emptied it into the air, waving his arms and jumping so that mad animals would know the point of the racket's origin. Yet in the same instant he knew it had done no good.

Death charged toward him, a macerating death that would leave him and his orchard a pulp. Luke Paisley dropped to his knees, whipping

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out his match holder. A breeze came from the southwest. While a grass fire would not burn directly toward the herd, it would cut a diagonal across their course that might turn them a little.

He fired the torch and ran with it, setting half a dozen blazes going. They danced, puny and nearly motionless for an instant, then lanced and took direction.

The thundering herd was less than a quarter mile way. Writhing sausages of smoke lifted quickly to form a tangent transversing its path. The force of suggestion sank into the wild brains of the leaders. After a long moment in which Luke sagged weakly to his knees they swerved slightly to the left.

They headed then toward the cabin and outbuildings, but Luke did not care. New buildings could be cut from the woodstands and raised by his own two hands, but new nursery stock was a continent's breadth away.

Smoke and dust swirled about him, and in his ears was the mighty roar of pounding hoofs. In strength-sapped fascination he watched the bobbing, lancing forms hurtling by a hundred yards distant from him. The uproar was so great he did not hear the sound of other hoofs behind him. He was not aware of the approachers until their mounts were pulled to balled-foot stops on either side of him.

Ollie Bishop flung himself from saddle and hurtled toward Luke as the latter spun around. Hap Flint's six-gun was in his hand, leveled on the orchadist. To his left Woody Jackson reined up, grinning. Bishop stabbed forward, danger in his twisted, half-amused features.

Hatred erupted desperately within Luke Paisley. Head bent he charged toward Bishop with pumping fists. Bishop's lips peeled back as he met the attack.

Courage and hatred can lend only so much strength to the most desperate of men. In the next few minutes Luke Paisley took the beating of his life. Ollie Bishop stood four inches taller, was easily forty pounds heavier. He loved violence and had toughened in it. With methodical care he beat Luke Paisley to the ground.

Though Luke did not lose consciousness, he was only dimly aware of being thrown limply across the pommel of Bishop's saddle and of the horse being gigged into motion. It registered on him without much meaning that they were striking off after the stampeded herd, in the direction of the cabin. There he was dumped to the ground, and as the others alighted they surged around him again. Flint and Jackson lifted him to his feet and propelled his sagging figure into the lean-to off the woodshed, where Luke had set up a work shop.

They let him sit on a box, and his senses began to clear a little. He saw that none of the solid log buildings had been hurt, though the surrounding earth appeared to have been ploughed and everything movable had been knocked sky-west.

"You had more nerve than I figured, facing that stampede!" Ollie Bishop said, with reluctant admira-

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tion. "You saved your blasted orchard. But we got more than one trick in the bag!"

"It wasn't only the orchard you meant to grind up!" Luke grated, through swollen lips. "You meant to get me, too!"

"Hoped to!" Bishop corrected. "It was a long shot that didn't land. We've got a way of fixing that. A cougar started that stampede, see? We didn't have nothing to do with it. Woody here killed the blamed thing and was bringing it into camp on a pony to skin it. It accidentally spooked the cows. And they accidentally took off in the direction of your place."

"They missed the trees, and I'm still alive!" Luke told him defiantly. "What good is that yarn going to do you?"

Bishop's scrawny face went ugly then, though he grinned. "You won't be alive long, pilgrim. Looks like you're too big a stubborn fool to be chased off. We want this valley and its easy watering. The cows can knock-down your orchard any time we've a mind to drive 'em through. But you're going to be found out there in that field, torn to pieces by that stampede. We can make it look real with a club."

Luke's eyes widened in horror. The man meant it. As calmly as he would have discussed the clubbing of a beast he told his murder plan. Luke saw its craft. Evidence of the stampede was everywhere. Nobody would question the apparent fact that Luke Paisley had died in it. And there probably was a cougar carcass to substantiate the yarn about the accidental origin of the stampede.

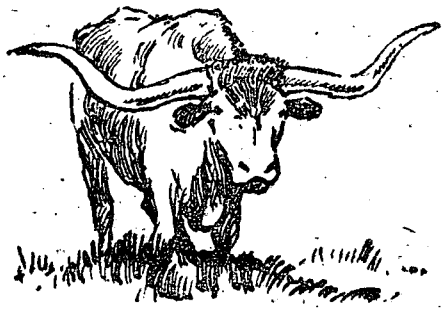
"Don't waste time blowing about it, Ollie!" Hap Flint snapped. "Let's get it over with and outa here!"

Luke flinched when he saw the object that Ollie Bishop picked up. It was a length of iron pipe, left over when Luke had rigged his irrigating system from the creek. Bishop hefted it, grinning, and Luke knew that the thing that was coming would be a delight to the man.

Luke did not wait further. His hand had moved a little behind him and closed over the pruning knife he had left lying on the box earlier that day. With its short, curved blade his captors had not recognized it as a dangerous weapon, if they had noticed it at all, nor could it do much.

Luke brought it up, but he swung toward Flint, at his right, instead of Bishop. The short, hooked blade ripped across Flint's shoulder, instantly staining his shirt with blood. Flint yelled and sprang away, hurt and surprised. Luke made a sweeping pass at Jackson, who retreated hastily, clawing at his gun.

Wheeling, Luke charged straight



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toward Ollie Bishop who drew back the pipe to swing viciously. Ducking, Luke veered again, plunging toward the door.

"Don't shoot, you fool!" Bishop rasped at Jackson. "We don't want a bullet hole in him!"

Luke had figured on that, and he pumped fresh energy into his racing legs as he sped through the door and struck off across the yard. Bishop came pounding behind him, waving the pipe in hope of getting a chance to swing it lethally. Behind Bishop charged the other pair.

Luke beat them to the back door of the cabin by only a hair's-breadth. As he plunged inside he slammed the the door and shot the cross bar into place, while the pursuers rammed against it. There was a carbine standing in the corner of the kitchen and he lost no time getting it.

"If you get me, there'll be some holes in me!" he called out, "and maybe a few in you jaybos, too!" He sent a shot through the door.

He heard them pound back across the porch, and rushing to the window he knocked out a pane of glass with a sweep of the gun barrel. He got in a couple of fast but erratic shots before the trio disappeared into the cover of the lean-to.

An elation came to Luke Paisley, though he knew the odds were greatly against him. A distance of about forty feet separated the two structures. The log walls of each were tightly chinked, so the fight would resolve into a slow, dangerous process of watchful waiting. In such a contest the edge would be with Bishop. Luke decided he would have to pull a surprise if he were to have a chance.

He kept his eye on the small, sashless window of the lean-to, which was the only opening through which they could fire. Yet a gun exploded there suddenly, and the slug smashed out the remaining glass in the kitchen window. They were along the far wall, which was obscured by the gloom of the interior.

Not daring to risk showing himself at the window again, Luke looked around the kitchen. Suddenly his gaze fixed, his eyes narrowing speculatively. In a corner stood a spray gun, the valve of which he had been repairing the night before so he could treat the young trees. Crouching past the window, he examined the sprayer carefully. He stepped into the pantry and picked up a kerosene can, filling the sprayer from it.

To dissuade the gunmen in case they had noted this preoccupation, Luke picked up the carbine and fired a shot into the interior of the lean-to. The sally drew heavy return fire, and he flung himself away from the window in the nick of time. His proposal was dangerous, for they commanded a view of the entire back wall of the cabin.

Luke opened the door, knowing they would see this but would likely hold fire until he showed himself. He dropped onto his belly, his face at the crack of the door. He waited an instant, and his movement brought no response. Carefully he began to

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squirt the kerosene across the open, playing it along the base of the lean to, where dry grass stood a couple of feet high.

He had the feeling he had accomplished this without arousing their suspicious. Next he soaked his bandanna in kerosene and tied it to the end of a stick. He flamed the oily cloth and, moving swiftly, opened the door a trifle and hurled the flaring missile across the yard.

The door splintered as lead slugs tore into it. Luke hurled himself back, sweeping up the carbine.

It took a couple of seconds for Bishop and his men to digest what was taking place. Fire caught in the oil-sprayed grass and chuckled into life, bending and leaping against the lean to wall. Smoke lifted past the window, and Luke could imagine their consternation. A paroxysm of wild shooting came from the lean-to, which died abruptly as the trapped men seemed to ponder their situation.

The icy fingers of fear clutched at Luke as he waited near the partly opened door, knowing they would charge out at any moment, that his advantage in position was offset by their number.

Woody Jackson lead the break, his six-gun bucking as it sent lead smashing into the door close to Luke. Luke's carbine spoke, and the man pitched forward. The other two came out together, firing madly, and Luke knew the climactic second of his life was at hand.

He flung open the door and came out onto the porch, the carbine at his hip and speaking only when he had a target lined up. His nerves were steady, suddenly, and it was with something close to indifferences that he felt the impact against his shoulder and knew he was hit. He bit his lip and drove Hap Flint to the ground. Ollie Bishop still came on, his features distorted, his small eyes gleaming. Suddenly Luke felt no fear of the man. He calmly squeezed the trigger.

Luke took only time enough to make certain none of the three was playing possom, then he set to work with water buckets. He could not hope to save the lean-to and woodshed but it was a small price to pay for his life. With irrigating water he had flumed from Feather Creek he saved the cabin.

Not until then did Luke stagger around the cabin to a place where he could look at his young orchard. The grass fire with which he had stopped the stampede had petered out at Feather Creek. Fire had saved his orchard and fire had saved his life, and it had burned away the last traces of his immaturity. In him was the quiet conviction that come what might, here in this raw new country, he could meet the future. He could take care of Dora. In the spring those slender whips with their first hesitant leaves would be blossoming. He and Dora would walk among them.

And there would be many springs.

THE END

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WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

NOT so long ago, as cities measure the span of their existence, Roswell, New Mexico, was just a cattle-trail trading post on the plains bordering the Pecos River.

F.S. sent us a query about Roswell this week. "That is one town I am determined to visit when the war is over," his letter said. "Anything you can tell me about the city and its history will be welcome. Whatever became of the Chisum Ranch?"

John Chisum drove his cattle past Roswell on their way to Ft. Sumner further north, his lean-flanked Texas longhorns famous for their "long rail" brand and "jinglebob" ear-mark. Across from the little settlement up the east side of the Pecos ran the Goodnight-Loving Trail reaching from Texas northwards across New Mexico into Colorado and Wyoming. During its heyday upward of a quarter million head of cattle trailed this route to market.

Goodnight and Loving paved the way for cattle over the endless miles of virtually barren country below Roswell. But it was John Chisum who became known as the Cattle King of the Pecos.

From Roswell Chisum laid out and charted another trail westward that passed over two mountain ranges into Mesilla Valley and eventually brought "jinglebob" beef into distant Arizona. Until 1880 when the coming of the railroad into New Mexico supplanted the trail herds marching north, Roswell was a cattle crossroads. Even after that date the trail drives westward into Arizona Territory continued for many years.

Steeped in early cattle history, Roswell today is one of New Mexico's most modern and attractive cities. It has a railroad, bus lines and an airport all serving its transportation needs. Its wide streets are shaded by giant cottonwoods and willows. Its business center bustles with activity.

The varied industries present-day Roswell boasts tell in themselves the story of the development of the town and the surrounding country. They include meat-packing plants, creameries, cotton gins and flour mills.

Roswell is still cattle country. But its adjacent area is also farming land. Cotton, alfalfa, corn, small grain and garden truck, to the tune of two million dollars' worth annually,

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now come from this section.

Successful farming in the region started just before the turn of the present century when the accidental discovery of artesian water in the neighborhood disclosed a virtually unlimited supply of the precious fluid underlying the sun-baked, semi-arid country. As soon thereafter as wells could be sunk and ditches dug, irrigation farming around Roswell got off to a splashing start.

At the start Roswell might have been a place called Missouri Plaza. About 1865 a group of Missourian settlers planned to establish a town in that part of southeastern New Mexico and chose a spot a few miles southwest of the present Roswell. Lack of sufficient water forced them to abandon their scheme.

During the great trail-driving period Roswell grew into a thriving and important trail center. Farming came later, following the disclosure of artesian wells in the district. As Roswell developed it experienced two land booms and one oil boom. Today it is the county seat of Chaves County and has a population of roughly fifteen thousand persons.

What became of the Chisum Ranch? Cornell University owns it, operating it as an experiment station for testing range-control methods and crop diversification.

In the decade between 1870 and 1880 John Chisum's ranch was credited with being not only the largest ranch in New Mexico but one of the largest cattle spreads the West ever knew. At that time land Chisum claimed for his jinglebob steers reached from Ft. Sumner two hundred miles south down the valley of the Pecos River to the Texas border line.

South of Roswell about five miles, the old Chisum home ranch lies to the right of Highway 285, the main road from Roswell down to New Mexico's world-famed Carlsbad Caverns.

To P.G., Dubuque, Iowa: In New Mexico hunters have three varieties of deer to stalk; the whitetail; the Sonoran; and the mule deer. Both black and brown bear may be hunted in the State and there is a regular yearly open season on wild turkey. Wildcats and coyotes may be hunted at any time.

To J.B., Columbus, Georgia: A canary may not eat much, but growing canary feed is big farm business in some sections of the Northwest. It's grown in ton lots in fields in the Nez Perce and Camas Prairie section of northern Idaho. Last season a dealer in New York City bought over two thousand tons, enough to fill forty to fifty railroad cars. The special seed, related to buckwheat, is very high in protein.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

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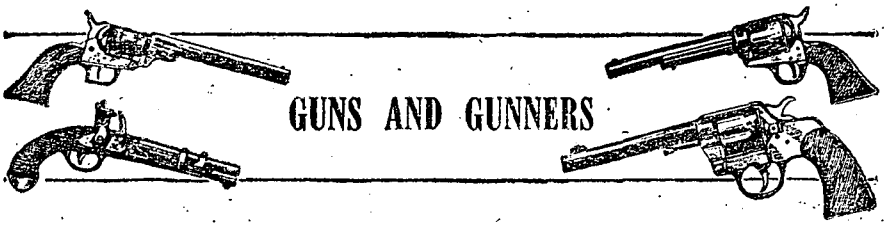

GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

If you followed the basic instruction given last month on the art of learning to shoot a pistol or revolver, you are now ready for "dry practice."

Dry practice is nothing more than target work without the use of live ammunition. Almost all good shots practice dry firing regularly. I called on one friend a few years ago, and in an elaborate office in New York, watched him remove a fine target revolver from his desk, take a good shooting position, and deliberately aim and snap on a miniature target thumbtacked to the wall at a range of 15 feet. He told me that he had practiced this way regularly for years.

Do as this man does—practice five minutes each day. Keep at it. Then when you shoot live ammunition, make believe you are still practicing.

If you do this, you will soon acquire the proper shooting position *for you* without effort. You will start in by shifting many times—then gradually the position will become [illegible]ural. The big secret is to call [illegible]ots. Know just where your [illegible] at the time the hammer [illegible]ll learn how to correct errors. Don't guess. Luck never made a good shot.

Then will come the time when you will be able to go on a range and shoot live ammunition. Do not feel that because you haven't burned up many cartridges, you can afford to throw your shots away in practice. Take extreme care. When you miss, know why—and correct it the next time. Between actual range practice and the time you next go out, return to dry practice.

A lot of the boys ask me if this dry practice will injure a good gun. The answer is no. The only exception applies to certain types of .22 revolvers and rifles where the rimfire firing pin can contact and batter the edge of the chamber. In centerfire guns there is nothing to worry about. Any good gun will outlast the owner, even if he uses it only for dry practice.

There is just one drawback to dry firing—and that is mental. There is no noise; there is no recoil; there is no bullet hole in the paper. As a result, you can easily become careless and throw your shots away. That is up to you. No one else will gain by it. It you want to cheat

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yourself, no one can help you. Make every shot count, and you'll soon learn to call your shots at an 8, 9 or 10 with surprising regularity.

I've started many a lad on dry practice with a revolver. He always complains that he can't hold a gun steady. Who can? No one. Line up your sights and the bulls-eye. You will wander off, but don't be discouraged. You just started to squeeze the trigger when the bull got away. Don't relax—hold it! As the bull comes back in line with the sights, add a bit more trigger pressure. As it goes off, hold again. Eventually as things line up, the gun goes off without your knowledge, and the bullet connects. Do not rush your shots. You'll never hit that way. Rushing means jerking, and jerking means misses.

Just a few final tips. If you use a gun with a small frame and have a large hand, the knuckle of the second finger will probably contact the back of the trigger guard when you take a normal grip. The first shot lets the gun recoil against that knuckle and you remember. Soon you learn to flinch. You quickly develop worries in your shooting.

If you have this trouble, try a lower position on the grip. Curl your little finger beneath the butt of the gun and you will find that this steadies the position and insures uniformity. Don't fight a gun. Don't try to squeeze the juice out of the stocks. The strangle hold never gets you anywhere, but I suggest that you prove it to your own satisfaction. Grip a gun normally, line the sights on the target, and then try to squeeze moisture from that grip. Your hand will soon start to tremble, proving that the theory is wrong. Keep at it. Keep squeezing. Soon that gun will shake like a bowl of jelly. Then, after a few moments of complete relaxation, try again, this time with a very light grip. Note the difference.

No, the gun will not kick out of your hand that way. I've watched the firing of the heaviest practical loads in guns of the greatest recoil—but I have never seen a case of a gun kicking out of a shooter's hand.

I haven't mentioned one headache—the left arm. What to do with it? Assuming that you shoot right-handed, get rid of that left hand. Don't let it get in the way. Put it in a pocket; lock the fingers in the belt at the side or back—only don't let it dangle uselessly. It will sway the body.

It is your job now. I've done my best. No coach can make a shooter without the shooter's help. Let's see if you've got it—

"Ready on the right . . ."
"Ready on the left . . ."
"Commence firing!"

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A[illegible] will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe [illegible] and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York [illegible] you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do n[illegible]

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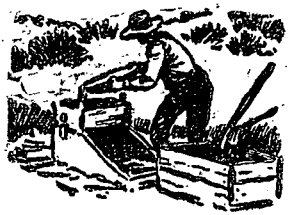

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

THERE is a gold-placer region in still gold-rich Alaska that produced some three million dollars before the war. It is hard to reach. For much of forty-two miles a low, marshy, almost impenetrable swamp guards the entrance to the gold country in summer time. Back of it lie high, barren mountain peaks and the solid, eternal ice of a glacier wall.

Ultra-modern airplane travel is about the best way for a prospector to get himself and his supplies set down in the heart of this gold section. And it is the best way for him to get out when snow flies and winter ice locks the water in the creeks, shutting off his summer season's work.

The district, known as the Chistochina, lies in the northern Copper River region in southeastern Alaska. The Richardson Highway from Valdez at the head of Prince William Sound will take you within striking distance of the gold-carrying gravels of Slate Creek, Chisna River, Miller Gulch, Middle Fork and Eagle Creek, all of which are tributaries of the Chistochina River which heads high up in the mountains at the foot of the Chistochina glacier. But most of the way you are on your own, unless, of course, you fly in.

Some thirty miles from Copper River the Chisna joins the Chistochina. Back around 1900 placer gold in rich concentration was discovered along the Chisna. Slate Creek and Miller Gulch up in the glacier country near the head of the Chisna have yielded a good share of the district's past production. Though recent operations have been chiefly in the lower part of the Chisna River valley where the mountain and lowland areas meet, it is reasonable to believe that the entire valley is likely to be prospective placer-mining ground. Authorities have pronounced it so.

There used to be a post office at Chisna in the camp's first heyday but that too is now in ruins. Or was just before the war. The gold claims in this section lie where the valley is fairly wide, the broad flat extending westward to the Chisna's junction with the Chistochina. Further north the river valley closes in until there is only a narrow gorge between high, rugged mountains through which the

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waters of the Chisna tumble turbulently.

In places there are gravel benches above the Chisna. These have not, so far as we know, been thoroughly prospected and they may prove a potential future source of further placer gold deposits.

Slate Creek, one of the rich producers in the early days, joins the Chistochina up near the later's source less than a mile below the foot of the Chistochina glacier. Being high up in a region of steep, snow-covered glacier-blocked mountains, the Slate Creek region has a mighty short open-water summer season, even for Alaska. The ground does not thaw out until very late in the spring and early fall brings frost and freezing weather. Add to this the hazards of swift floods that occur some summers, landslide dangers and the fact that the set-up is above timberline and far from even a source of firewood and you can readily understand why prospecting in this area is strictly a proposition for the hardy, resourceful and adventurous.

Miller Gulch, another rich section originally, lies on the south side of Slate Creek about two miles from its mouth. Though the Gulch is narrow and steep and less than a mile long it has produced a lot of gold in the past. A few patches of virgin gold ground, still left, were being worked by individuals using small-scale placer equipment in 1941 according to F. H. Moffit who visited the section that year to prepare a firsthand report on mining in the northern Copper River region for the U. S. Geological Survey. In his report—U. S. Geo. Survey Bulletin 943-B—Moffit says of one of these one-man outfits working in the gulch:

"The deposit is frozen and requires thawing before it can be shoveled into the sluice boxes. Most of the work was done at night to avoid the danger of rocks falling from the high face of the cut during the day. The ground carries sufficient gold to permit of its being mined in this small way, and the operations have been carried on for a number of years. . . ."

That gives you an idea of what small scale placer gold mining is like in this particular part of Alaska and the hardships that must be faced and conquered if you hope to make a stake mining in this hard-to-reach region of Alaska in the post-war days to come.

All of which should answer, at least in part, Reader B. J.'s recent query from Portland, Oregon, concerning a "remote" gold-prospecting section in Alaska. "If," his letter asked, "such sections still exist?"

They sure do, B. J. The Chistochina district is only *one* of them. One of many, as a plain matter of fact.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.

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GUN MAGIC

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

To the frightened people of Antelope, Bill Biedler wore the tainted brand of a hired killer, yet no amount of money could have bought his guns

LARGELY because of Price Chilton's reputation for fair dealing, Antelope shipped more than its share of the cattle that came in off the desert. During the shipping season Antelope was a roaring, brawling cow town. The rest of the year it dozed peacefully, the even tenor of its life broken by nothing more than the toot of a passing train, or the arrival of the whiskey drummer who always stopped at the Staghorn and passed out samples of his goods. It was natural, then, that every stranger should come under immediate observation. So it was with Bill Biedler when he rode in off the desert.

Biedler was not a handsome man. Neither was he exceptionally tall, nor thick of body, yet he was a man who would stand out in any kind of company. He rode the full length of the street, and back as far as the small

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building with the sign lettered on the window, PRICE CHILTON, CATTLE BUYER, rode slouched a little, lax of body in the manner of a man who has come a long ways. There were certain things about him that the men of Antelope noted as they watched from behind dust-smeared windows, the two guns holstered low on his thighs and thonged down in the manner of a man who lived by those guns, the long-fingered hands that never seemed to move far from gun butts, the quick, sinewy grace with which he moved, and his sun-bronzed, impassive face.

Biedler dismounted in front of Chilton's office, and tried the door. Finding it locked, he shrugged, and leisurely remounted in the manner of a man who has come a great distance to do a job, and has all the time in the world to do it. He rode on down the street, and reined into the public stable, feeling men's eyes upon him, and smiling a little as if inwardly satisfied. This was exactly as he had known it would be, and it was as he wanted it.

As the hostler came out of the gloom of the stable to take his horse, Biedler asked: "Where'll I find Price Chilton?"

The hostler pursed his lips, and spat an amber stream into the litter of the stable, withholding his answer while he sized Biedler up. "Try his office?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

The hostler tongued his chew of tobacco to the other side of his mouth. "Looks like you come quite a piece," he remarked.

"From Christmas Lake. My name's Biedler." He said his name slowly so the hostler would remember. "Bill Biedler. I'm looking for Price Chilton."

"Oh, yeah," the hostler said as if he'd forgotten. "You wanted to see Price. Well now, he ain't very busy this time of year. No beef coming in. You oughtta be able to find him all right. He might be over in the Staghorn. Did you try there?"

"No. Where else might he be?"

The hostler furrowed his brow as if in deep thought. His eyes kept dropping to the guns on Biedler's hips as if he couldn't understand why a man of Biedler's class would want to see Chilton. Finally he said: "Well, I'll tell you. He might be at home." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "It's the big white house. Biggest one on the hill."

"So Chilton has the biggest house on the hill," Biedler said softly. "He must do all right."

"Oh yeah, Price does all right. Lot of cattle go out of here. He handles most of 'em. He's got the right price, I guess." The hostler laughed uproariously and slapped his leg. "You get it? His first name is Price. Price Chilton."

"I get it all right." Biedler laid his cold, blue eyes on the hostler. "Or perhaps I should say I didn't get it. And, mister, grain this horse double, and you'd better treat him good."

The laugh died in the hostler's throat as Biedler swung on his heel, and angled across the street to the hotel. The hostler swallowed, and said aloud: "Say, that hombre's a tough one. Wonder what he wants

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with Price? And what did he mean by saying he didn't get it?"

There was deep respect in the hotel clerk's eyes as he dipped a pen, and handed it to Biedler.

"You've got a vacant room?" Biedler asked as he returned the pen.

"Plenty of rooms now," the clerk said deferentially. "It's different when the rush season is on. Sometimes we have to put up beds in the hall, or even down here in the lobby."

"You mean," Biedler said, his voice velvet-smooth, "the rush season for Price Chilton."

"Why, yes." There had been nothing in Biedler's tone nor manner to suggest that he was subtly threatening Chilton, yet the clerk was suddenly on guard. His eyes dropped to Biedler's holstered guns. Slowly they lifted to the lean, sun-darkened face. He said: "Price handles most of the beef that goes out of here."

"Do you know where I could find him?"

"You . . . you're looking for Chilton?" the clerk asked doubtfully.

"That's why I'm here."

"He might be in the Staghorn."

"Thanks. I'll look there," Biedler said, and reached for the key.

"Number sixteen. Third room to your right."

Biedler loitered in his room, waiting for the seed to grow that he had planted. He washed, then sat on the bed while he smoked a cigarette. After a while he left his room, and moved leisurely along the rickety boardwalk to the barber shop.

"Reckon I need a shave," Biedler said, feeling of the dark stubble on his cheek. "Getting long enough to start growing back in. Purty hard to shave a man when they do that, ain't it?"

The barber laughed without mirth. "Yeah, it is. You . . . just passing through?"

"No. I may stay awhile." Biedler took his seat in the chair. "My name's Biedler. Bill Biedler. I've got business with Price Chilton. Know where I could find him?"

The barber made a quick turn to the window, and glanced toward the Staghorn as if hoping he could find some way to warn Chilton. He was frowning when he turned back to Biedler. "He might be in the Staghorn. . . . Biedler." He said the name thoughtfully as if trying to place it. "Biedler. Don't seem like I ever heard of it." He picked up his razor and began to strop it.

"Chilton has," Biedler said lazily.

The barber laid his razor down. "Just a minute. I'll be right back."

Biedler leaned back in the chair, a contented smile on his lips.

Later, when Biedler stepped into the Staghorn, Price Chilton was not there. Nor was Biedler surprised. It was working according to plan. He ordered a beer, and while he drank it, he noted the apron covertly eying him as he busily mopped the bar top.

Biedler looked around the deserted saloon. "Must be a holiday," he observed. "You reckon Price Chilton's in town?"

"I ain't seen him lately," the apron said, and turned his back to Biedler.

Evening shadows were long across the street when Bill Biedler left the

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saloon, and stepped into the Bon Ton Restaurant. He ordered a steak, and when he'd finished, he asked: "Does Price Chilton ever eat in here?"

The whiskered old restaurant man leaned over the counter, and pointed at Biedler's guns. "He don't often. Let me tell you something, stranger. You look tough, and mebbeso you are. I ain't saying you ain't, but I'm telling you one thing. Price Chilton is a big man in this town. He owns most of it. Most everybody that lives here works for him. Now I've been hearing about you for the last three hours. Ever since you rode in."

Biedler laid a silver dollar on the counter. "What was it you wanted to tell me?"

The whiskered oldster picked up the dollar. "This town can't afford to lose Price Chilton. Wouldn't be no town of Antelope if it wasn't for him. Fact is, he's the one that got the railroad built in here. Now why in tarnation have you got it into your head to go gunning for him?" He slammed Biedler's change down on the counter. "I dunno what you got against him. Mebbeso he's got some things behind him he ain't proud of. Most of us do. That ain't here nor there. What I'm saying is this. There's some women and kids who depend on this town and the business that goes on here for a living. What'll it get you if you plug Price?"

Biedler's mouth was a thin, straight line as he reached for his change and pocketed it. "Did I say I was aiming to plug Chilton? There's something mighty funny about this town. I've been trying to get hold of Chilton ever since I got here, and I haven't seen hide nor hair of him. What's the matter?"

Again the oldster pointed at Biedler's guns. "It's plain enough what you are, and being that, it ain't no secret why you're here. Now just because Marshal Aims ain't—" The oldster stopped, and chewed on the tip of his bushy mustache for a moment.

"What's that about Marshal Aims?" Biedler asked softly.

"He's sick," the oldster said defiantly, "so he can't run you out of town like he oughtta, but you ain't getting away with nothing. We've got a couple of tough hands coming in from Red Slide. Price Chilton ain't no hand with a gun. When them boys get here, mebbe you'll find out your business ain't all it's cracked up to be. I've seen hombres like you come and go. Mostly go. There'll be a time when you get planted in a hole six feet deep. Why don't you get smart, and slope out while you're all in one piece?"

"I aim to do that, my friend," Biedler said, "and thanks for the advice. Also the information." And Biedler stepped into the street.

There was one thing yet to be done. He climbed the hill to where Price Chilton's big house stood like the crown on a monarch's head. Full darkness had come by the time Biedler walked through the gate and up the path. Lights showed in the lower part of the house, and in one second-story window.

Biedler knocked on the door. A moment later it was opened by a girl. She was eighteen or so, Bied-

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ler guessed, golden-haired and altogether lovely. For one moment regret was in him. He saw the fear in her face as she looked at him, saw it deepen as her eyes dropped to his guns. Then the regret was gone, for he was remembering Price Chilton.

"I'd like to see Price Chilton," Biedler said, and put his foot on the threshold as the girl started to shut the door.

"He isn't here," she said, and closed the door until Biedler felt the pressure of it upon his foot.

"Can you tell me where I could find him?"

"I don't know. Will you go please?"

Terror was in the girl's pale face, her eyes wide. It must have been quite a story they'd brought up here about him. Now Biedler said gently: "It's too bad to make a lady lie. You are a lady, for the lie does not come easy to you. It's too bad for a man to hide behind a woman's skirt. Tell that to Price Chilton. Tell him that my name is Bill Biedler. He'll remember Jim Biedler well." Then Biedler nodded gravely at the girl, removed his foot from the door, and walked away.

Once, when he had gone through the gate, he looked back. He smiled grimly when he saw the round, fat face at the upstairs window. He saw the terror on it. That was right and just, for there is little punishment in life that is worse than the constant, heart-stabbing pains of fear that were now in Price Chilton.

It would not be long now, Bill Biedler thought, if he were reading the sign right. When he turned the corner into Main Street he saw two men go into the Staghorn. In the brief moment that it took them to cross the lighted area in front of the saloon, and shoulder through the batwings, Biedler saw the crossed cartridge belts and the guns on their hips. These would be the tough hands who had been sent for from Red Slide.

Outside the batwings Biedler paused momentarily to lift his guns and drop them back so that they rode easily in leather. He heard a man ask: "Where is this hombre you want whittled down?"

"I ain't seen him for an hour or more," the barkeep answered.

From the back of the saloon, a man called: "Stick around. He'll show up purty soon."

There was one uneasy moment when Bill Biedler pushed through the batwings and headed for the bar. The two men swung to face him, one a lanky, red-headed man with a dusting of freckles over his stub nose, the other bull-necked and heavy-bodied with a pair of bloodshot eyes that fixed on Biedler as he came toward them.

It was an uneasy moment because Biedler did not know what they were going to do. Then he saw that they didn't know themselves. It takes a moment to work up nerve for a killing, even with paid killers like the redhead and the bull-necked man who stood before him. Too, they weren't sure if this was the man, and it took a moment to get the nod from the barkeep. That was long enough. Bill Biedler had reached the bar

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and was within five feet of them then.

The advantage Biedler held lay in the fact that he knew exactly what he was going to do. When he plucked gun he didn't bring it level and prong back the hammer. Instead he swung the long barrel up in a vicious, full-arm sweep that caught the bull-necked man on the side of the head and knocked him to the floor in an inert pile.

The redhead had clawed frantically for his gun when he saw Biedler make the first move, but he was caught entirely offguard by Biedler's unexpected maneuver. He fired, a wild shot that splintered a window casing in the front of the saloon. Before he could fire again Biedler had stepped over the bull-necked man's body and swung his gun barrel at the redhead's skull while his left batted down the man's Colt. The second bullet slapped into the floor. Biedler didn't get a full swing at the man's head, but it was enough to stun him momentarily. Biedler rapped him across the knuckles with his gun barrel. The .45 dropped from the redhead's hand. Biedler scooped up the gun, pulled the other from the left-hand holster, and stepped back, his own gun cocked.

"Git," Biedler said. "If I see you around this town again, I'll fill you so full of lead you wouldn't float in Snake River if you had a life preserver on."

The redhead "got," weaving a little from the blow he'd received. Biedler pulled the two guns from the holsters of the bull-necked man who was still sleeping peacefully, and slipped them into his waistband. He said to the bartender: "If you make one move while I'm here, even an innocent one, you get a dose of hot lead. Savvy?"

The bartender's Adam's apple moved up and down frantically. "Sure, sure," he managed between gulps. "I won't make a move."

Then Biedler, the gun still in his hand, walked toward the back table where three men sat. One was the whiskery restaurant man, one a small man with pink cheeks and a bald head, the third one tall, skinny, and gloomy-looking with black eyes that were glittering now with terrible animosity.

"See here . . ." the skinny man began, and stopped, for Biedler motioned at him with his gun. In view of what had just happened, that gun was not anything the skinny man wished to argue with.

"A strange town," Biedler murmured, "and strange men who run it. I rode into town a few hours ago, and began asking for Price Chilton. I couldn't find him. Why? Because the folks I talked to sent word ahead of me, and he hid out. Why? Because he knew why I was here."

"A gunman's brand is plain enough to read," the restaurant man snarled. "You came here to kill Price either for yourself, or for somebody's pay."

"Do I look like those mongrels you brought in from Red Slide?" Biedler asked. None of the three answered him. Biedler shook his

(*Continued on page 128*)

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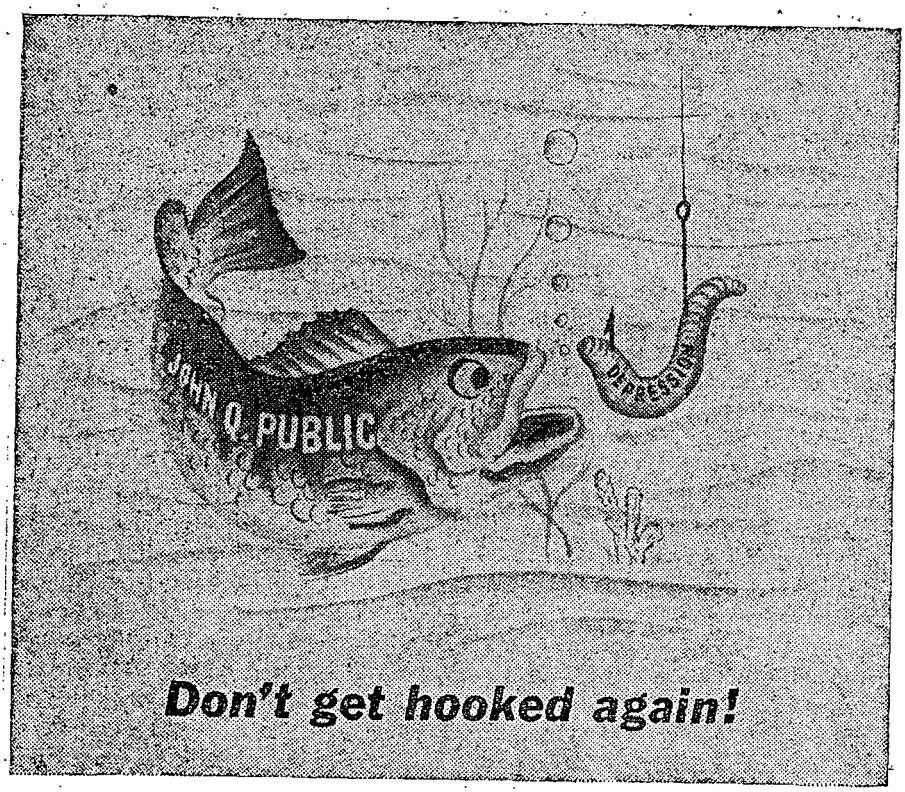

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(*Continued from page 126*)

head. "A strange town, and strange town fathers."

"If Marshal Aims wasn't sick in bed—" the restaurant man began.

"Ah, yes," Biedler cut in, "I knew about that before I came." His blue eyes moved from the restaurant man to the pink-cheeked one and on to the skinny man. "The merchant, the banker, and the steak fryer. You three have much to lose if Antelope should fold up as a shipping point. In a way, Price Chilton has made Antelope what it is, and in that way you've all profited. Gentlemen, I did not come here to kill Price Chilton, yet you hire two toughs to kill me. Yes, it is a strange town. When I go back into the high desert, and tell what has happened, another year may well see more cattle shipped from Red Slide and Ten Mile. That will mean less from Antelope."

The three of them stirred uneasily. The skinny man said uncertainly: "Perhaps we were mistaken. These men . . ."

Biedler raised a hand. "We'll let that go. I'm dealing with you since I can't find Price Chilton."

"What is it you want?" the pink-cheeked man asked.

"The strangest thing among many strange things is Price Chilton's reputation for honesty. You three may not all be on the level, but you'd trust Chilton with your last nickel, and that's the name he has on the desert. That's why most of the cattle off the desert come here. It's why that during the shipping season you boys along with the rest of the business men in Antelope make enough money to give you a reason for staying."

The skinny man nodded his narrow head. "All right. What you say is true. Are you here to tell us that Price Chilton is crooked?"

"I will not say what Price Chilton is now. I will tell you what he was. A good many years ago he was a commission man in Cheyenne. I don't know the details of what happened, but it was something like this. My father had a cattle ranch in Oregon. At that time there were no railroads over which cattle owners could ship. They had more beef than market, so they put together a herd and drove to Cheyenne. A long drive, gentlemen, but the cattle got to Cheyenne. Price Chilton handled them. When it was all done, my father received twenty-six dollars and forty-nine cents for his share. Last week a man came through Antelope who was in Cheyenne at the time. He knew the story and recognized Price Chilton as the commission man from Cheyenne. That's why I'm here. I want to ask Chilton what happened to the rest of the money that should go to my father."

They looked at each other, the three of them, and none of them spoke for a time. The restaurant man stroked his beard. Finally he said. "What do you want us to do?"

"Find Chilton," Biedler said promptly. "Chilton will remember how much he stole. He'll pay me that sum and I'll take it to my father."

"If he doesn't?" the restaurant man asked.

Biedler patted the guns on his hips. "Then I'll get rough."

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The skinny man looked at the bull-necked gunman who was still lying on the floor. Then he looked at Biedler. There was something about the blue eyes fixed squarely on the man's black ones that assured the skinny man Bill Biedler would do exactly as he said.

Suddenly the skinny man made up his mind. "How much do you think Chilton owes your father?"

"I don't know."

"How do we know this is a legitimate debt?"

"Why do you think Chilton has been hiding out?"

The skinny man nodded. "All right. Would five thousand dollars satisfy your father?"

Biedler nodded. "It should be fair."

"Then," the skinny man said, "I'll get it for you."

Fifteen minutes later, after the banker had given Biedler the money, he said: "Perhaps you think it's peculiar that I'd give this to you. The fact is I was having a drink with Price in the Staghorn when the stableman brought word that you were looking for him. He fainted. We carried him into the doctor's office, and when he came to he told me the story very much as you told it. This you may not believe, but it's true: Price Chilton got his start with that money, and he's regretted it ever since. He was afraid to face you for fear you would kill him. He has a bad heart, and it's worth a good deal to all of us to keep him alive."

Biedler smiled. "I want him to

(*Continued on page 130*)

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live. He will think of this as long as he is alive."

"I don't think you understand how it is with Chilton," the banker said. "He will feel like a new man when he knows about this. He seemed to know quite a bit about your father. He said that a Biedler's word was as good as his bond. Will you promise you'll never come back to Antelope?"

"No, I won't promise that," Biedler said. "Who was the girl who answered the door when I went up to Chilton's house?"

"She's his niece," answered the banker.

"I'll come back," Biedler said, "but not to harm Price Chilton. I think that girl needs to be told the truth about me."

Biedler turned, then, and strode back to the stable, thinking about Trigger Jack Hennessy, a gunman whose life had once been saved by Biedler's father. Trigger Jack was the man who had recognized Price Chilton. He had left Antelope before Chilton had seen him, and had ridden directly for the Biedler ranch.

"I could have hung around Antelope," Trigger Jack had told Biedler's father, "but I wouldn't have done no good. Them Antelope folks think Price Chilton is an angel with little white wings, and I sure couldn't have told 'em no different. Besides, that jigger knows too much about me. But suppose Bill here rode in, packing a pair of irons, and started quizzing around for Chilton. What do you reckon would happen?"

"Bill ain't no gunswift," old man Biedler had answered. "What that hombre crooked out of me ain't enough to get a son killed over."

"Jim, I've owed you something for a long time," Trigger Jack had said. "I'm thinking this is the time for me to pay off. I know how jiggers like this Chilton operate. They make their dinero off the honest name they've built up, and they're scared to death somebody's gonna take it away from 'em. Jim, the job can be done, and it won't take no powder-burning on Bill's part to do it. And when it comes to taking away that honest name of Chilton's, every business man in Antelope is gonna be plumb anxious it don't happen."

It had been Trigger Jack's idea, and Bill Biedler had carried it out according to plan. Now, as Biedler took his horse from the stable, mounted, and rode west, he thought how a drifting gunslick like Trigger Jack Hennessy had gone out of his way to pay a debt. It had been Trigger Jack's guns that Biedler had carried today, thonged down as Jack wore them. He thought how fear made men do strange things, and how well Trigger Jack Hennessy knew human nature. He thought about the magic there was in a pair of guns, but most of all, Bill Biedler thought how that magic grew with the job for which they were used.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 72.

1. cartridge 2. rattlesnake 3. straw 4. spread 5. hitch 6. desert 7. powder 8. porcupine 9. brush 10. earmark 11. saddle 12. lobo 13. girth 14. feeder 15. rafter

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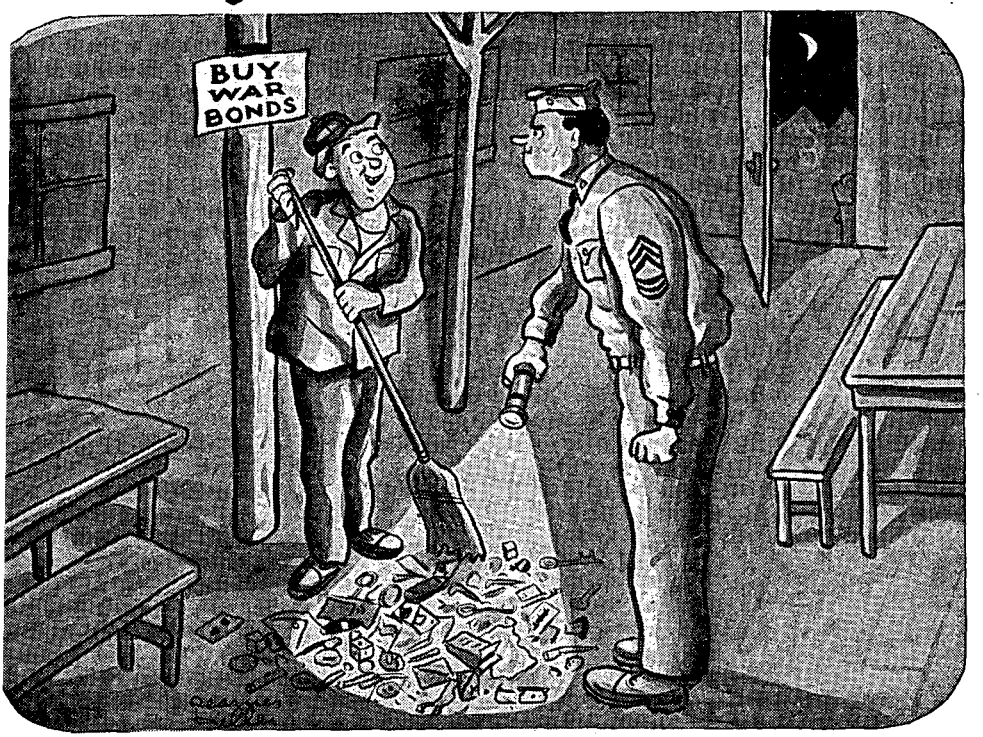

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Fresh DATED BATTERIES Last Longer
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Anyone who knows can tell the **REAL THING!**

IF YOU'RE a judge of fine whiskey, you know Calvert is *the real thing*. One taste tells you this superb blend is at its peak of pre-war excellence ...a whiskey that can't be imitated! Naturally, *you'll* want to be sure of serving and enjoying *the real thing*...so keep on asking for Calvert. America's Finest Blended Whiskies—from the House of Blends! Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C.

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